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LOS ANGELES

SING A SONG OF SYDNEY

By the same Author

APRIL'S SOWING

HEATHER OF THE SOUTH

LAKE OF ENCHANTMENT

LIFE'S WHAT YOU MAKE IT!

WILD, WILD HEART

DEAR ACQUAINTANCE

SANE JANE

CONCEALED TURNING

HETTY LOOKS FOR LOCAL COLOUR

HOME'S WHERE THE HEART IS

MISS TIVERTON'S SHIPWRECK

TURN THE HOUR

SING A SONG OF SYDNEY

A NOVEL BY
ROSEMARY REES

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To
JOSIE

KNOWN AND BELOVED BY ALL
AUSTRALIAN THEATRE-GOERS AS
"SALLY"

1909004

All the characters in this novel are fictitious.

CHAPTER I

IN spite of its lack of architectural beauty the big, old-fashioned stone house had a certain dignity.

Obviously in early days its grounds had occupied the entire acreage of the point. Now it was jostled by newly-erected blocks of flats, and the garden was reduced to little more than the actual site upon which the dwelling stood.

But no building could shut out the magnificent panorama upon which looked the windows and wide verandahs of the old house.

From the balcony one had an almost uninterrupted view up the harbour to the suspended arch of the bridge; saw across the water all the massed towers of the city against the sky; the pseudo-Tudor turrets of Government House amongst its trees and lawns; the slopes of the Botanical Gardens running down to the sea-wall; and beyond the jutting promontory of the Domain, the wharves and shipping of Woolloomooloo with the Naval Base at Garden Island off-shore.

This morning when Kathleen Armitage stepped out through the french windows of one of the rooms on the upper floor into the brilliant winter sunshine, the loveliness of the prospect before her chased for a moment from her harassed mind the thousand and one worries which beset her. This view, in spite of its familiarity, never failed to awaken within her joy and delight. A big liner was moving majestically over the sparkling water out towards the Heads; craft of all sorts—tugs, colliers, launches and motor-boats—passed backwards

and forwards across the sapphire plain; while above the grey rocks of the Point, flame trees—bare of leaves but blossom decked—showed scarlet against the blue. A ferry-boat was drawing into the wharf below the house: Kathleen could hear the clank of the gang-plank as it was swung between ship and shore.

For a second she stood leaning her arms upon the rusty iron balustrade, lost in a dream of peace and beauty. But not for long was she to be left thus freed from the cares of her everyday existence. Her mother's voice sounded from the house behind her.

"Where are you, Kathleen?"

"Here, mother." Her voice had a certain sharpness. Who was it said that you might love your relations, but you didn't always like them? Quickly she took herself to task for this unbidden thought. Her mother and her boy, John, were all that bound her to life. They were the two valid reasons for the carrying on of this soul-destroying boarding-house. And if Mrs. Montgomery at seventy-eight still looked upon her middle-aged daughter as a child to be dictated to, who could blame her?

Middle-aged? Was she that? thought Kathleen, with a small inward grimace. Certainly the fact that she would soon be in her fortieth year wasn't to be denied, and forty was more than middle-aged if one took three score years and ten to be the allotted . . .

Nonsense! She wouldn't admit she was middle-aged. She felt as young as ever, and though she had never been unduly vain of her good looks, she was glad that her mirror still gave her back a reflection which differed very little from that of her girlhood's days. The dark blue eyes were perhaps a trifle deeper set now than they had been formerly, the lines about the sensitive,

humorous mouth graven a little more firmly; but there was no touch of grey in the brown shining waves of hair combed back from her broad forehead and cut short—but not too short—behind the ears and at the neck.

“What is it, mother?” she called again—more gently this time. But she knew what it would be. ‘Kathleen, how much longer do you intend to allow that little Peggy Vincent to live on here without paying her bill?’

Or: ‘Can’t you *insist* on that trollop of a girl who calls herself a waitress washing some of the paint off her face?’

Mrs. Montgomery came out on to the balcony and joined her daughter. If it would be inappropriate to describe Kathleen Armitage as middle-aged, so would it be equally misleading to apply the adjective ‘old’ to Mrs. Montgomery. Old she undoubtedly was by tally of years, but she was as erect as her daughter, and her handsome face, though lined by time, was still alight with intelligence and energy.

“Colonel Mulholland’s been complaining again about the water not being hot enough in the upstairs bathroom,” she observed now. “If you’re not careful you’ll lose him, and with five rooms empty as it is, you can’t afford to do that.”

No, Kathleen couldn’t afford to lose Colonel Mulholland. There were so many things she couldn’t afford! Couldn’t afford—even if she wished to do so, which she didn’t—to have an argument with the painted waitress, for where was she likely to find another? Maids weren’t so easily come by now that the depression seemed to have lifted. Yes, she *could* afford to tell little Peggy Vincent to vacate her room, but what would she gain by that? The girl’s food in a household of close on twenty cost practically nothing, and Peggy would pay

her when she secured an engagement. Perhaps she'd be lucky today! She'd gone across to the city to interview an agent. If the poor child were turned adrift where on earth would she go? That wretched father of hers couldn't help her. No, whatever Mrs. Montgomery might say—and Heaven knew in the last few weeks she'd said a good deal on the subject of Peggy and her bill—Kathleen had no intention of asking her non-paying guest to vacate the small room she occupied.

From the garden below voices drifted up to the two above. Miss Hobhouse was sitting in the sun knitting, and Mrs. Epping, with the morning paper open on her fat knees, sat beside her. Now *there* were two detestable old cats whom Kathleen would gladly be rid of—if she could afford it!

"It's lowering the tone of the place having a young man like that here," remarked Miss Hobhouse acidly. "He's outrageously common. My nephew tells me he used actually to serve in his father's shop. And his father is a grocer, if you please! An ordinary grocer!"

"Not really!" Fat Mrs. Epping was scandalized.

"For two pins I'd tell Mrs. Armitage that either he leaves or I do."

Kathleen turned away from the balcony with a sigh. Charlie Moss, though certainly of humble parentage, was worth fifty Hobhouses and Eppings. He was a gifted young man, who, after winning various scholarships, was now studying at the University. In spite of his atrocious accent, his complete lack of reverence, and his sometimes ill-timed facetiousness, he was a warm-hearted and honest lad. She wasn't likely to forget his many kindnesses: mending fused lights; cleaning out guttering choked in a storm; even assisting in the kitchen when she herself had had to take the cook's

place—the cook one morning having suddenly telephoned for a taxi and departed, leaving only an army of empty whiskey bottles as mementoes of her stay at ‘Avalon.’

No! Miss Hobhouse might leave, but certainly not Charlie Moss. He stayed!

“I’ve just been having a few words with that painted hussy,” went on Mrs. Montgomery. “Most impertinent she was! I left her in the pantry, positively *throwing* the china about. I’m certain she’s—well, I wouldn’t like to say *what*! You can’t keep her here, Kathleen.”

“If you’ve been having a few words with her I don’t suppose I’m likely to keep her,” answered Kathleen dryly; and then, seeing that Mrs. Montgomery looked hurt, she added quickly: “Well, if she gives notice she won’t be much loss. I’ll go down and see her.”

If only her mother wouldn’t interfere quite so much with the staff! They were always complaining that they didn’t care to be given orders by two ‘mistresses; and yet Mrs. Montgomery meant so well! Her one idea was to help her beloved daughter, and this the contrite Kathleen knew.

“I’ve counted the linen and put it away.”

“Thanks so much, mother darling. Why don’t you get a book and sit out here in the sun for a little while? It’s such a perfect morning.”

“I’ve all sort of odd jobs to see to.”

“Let the jobs go hang. I can do them later.”

“You’ve more than enough to do as it is. I want to iron out those tray-cloths I rinsed through yesterday. Don’t always try to stop me helping you, Kathleen. I’m not quite decrepit yet.”

“You’re going up to Mrs. Simpson’s for bridge this afternoon.”

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You mustn't tire yourself."

"Tire myself indeed! I like to be busy."

No useful purpose could be served by continuing this discussion, so Kathleen, smiling at her mother, turned and left her.

But as she made her way along the upper hall and down the wide staircase her smile faded. Biddy was quite certain to depart now. Who cared about her painted face? She was a good waitress, and if her morals weren't all that they might be—as Mrs. Montgomery implied—she'd behaved perfectly well within the precincts of this respectable establishment.

Biddy was no longer throwing the china about in the pantry. Kathleen found her in her own room, where she was pushing all her wordly belongings into two small suitcases.

"What's the meaning of this, Biddy?" asked Kathleen. It was an entirely superfluous question, for Biddy's actions were sufficient explanation of her intentions.

"I won't be spoke to like that by nobody!" exclaimed Biddy. "No lady'd speak to another lady like she spoke to me. There's plenty more places to be had. I'm off."

"I've a right to demand a week's notice, Biddy."

"You can demand, but you won't get," replied the infuriated maid tersely.

That was true. Biddy had been paid her wages the day before. Unless Mrs. Armitage seized by force those two poor suitcases and retained them she'd little chance of any redress. And taking possession of her recalcitrant maids' belongings wasn't at all in Kathleen's line. "I shan't be able to give you a reference, Biddy."

"That's O.K. with me," returned the girl. "I don't want none."

"I'm sorry you're going. You were one of the best waitresses I ever had.

For a second Biddy's hands seemed to falter over the bundling up of a pair of soiled red shoes. "I'm sorry too, Mrs. Armitage. You've treated me fair. But I can't stay."

"Very well, if you must go, you must." Kathleen went out and closed the door behind her. The sight of those two poor little suitcases, and the tawdry finery, had had a curious effect upon her. She was no longer—if indeed she had ever been—angry with Biddy. A horrid stab of pity had struck at her heart. After all, did they get much out of life, these girls? Biddy had worked hard and well for the three months she had been at 'Avalon.' Kathleen found herself wishing that her mother were not quite so rigid a moralist. A little shutting of the eyes to certain tendencies in others couldn't surely be counted against one as lack of principle? It wasn't the first time she'd lost good maids through Mrs. Montgomery's objections to their 'goings on.' And it wasn't only the question of expediency—her desire to retain good workers—that raised this protest in Kathleen's heart; it was just this little poignant ache of pity which she had experienced a moment ago in Biddy's room.

Mrs. Montgomery, when her daughter attempted to voice these ideas, declared that she was not only sentimental and soft, but almost went so far as to insinuate that her attitude indicated a most deplorable moral laxity. Perhaps it did. Kathleen wasn't at all sure that her way of looking at these things was the right way.

She advanced along the hall to the telephone. Now she must ring up every likely registry office in an attempt to replace her waitress. She was already short-handed; for while she had so many rooms empty it was

imperative to reduce the wages bill. But the sudden loss of Biddy would disorganize the working of the whole establishment.

As she telephoned, first to one address and then another, her brain was busy endeavouring to rearrange the work. According to the papers there was still a great deal of unemployment, but no unemployed domestics as far as she could discover, judging by the replies she received from the various offices to which she telephoned.

With a worried frown she replaced the receiver, and as she did so she observed a young man advancing through the sunshine of the garden and up the steps to the open front door. Now why couldn't he be an unemployed waiter? she thought ruefully. That would be a beneficent act on the part of providence, but providence seemed so much more often malevolent than benevolent!

The young man raised his hat as she stepped to meet him. From a small satchel he carried he produced writing paper and envelopes.

Why did young men—apparently perfectly healthy, well set-up young men—meander round the suburbs pestering busy housewives to buy small goods such as these at about double the price for which they could be obtained in the city? she wondered irritably.

"Do you want . . ." he began, but she cut him short with a shake of her head, and then, because the question had been in her mind it came, apparently without volition, to her lips.

"Why do young men like you hawk things of this sort from door to door? Surely it isn't possible to make a living at it?"

"I can't answer for the others," he replied. "*I cer-*

tainly don't make a living. If I get enough for a bed and one solid meal a day I do well."

"And if you don't—make enough for that, I mean—what do you do?"

"There's always the Domain." His voice, and something in the smile—a bitterly ironic smile—with which he said this, roused Kathleen to sudden interest. He spoke like a gentleman—no mistaking a cultured accent—and his clear-cut features denoted breeding. Certainly the whole expression of the face—the shadow in the dark eyes so steadily regarding her, and the hard lines about the mouth—indicated both present bitterness and past suffering, and yet it wasn't by any means a bad face, rather the reverse, in fact.

"The Domain must be a trifle chilly for sleeping in at present," she said brusquely.

His only reply to this was a shrug.

"Can't you get any work? Real work, I mean?"

"No."

"But you're strong enough, aren't you?"

"I believe I am."

Looking down, Kathleen noticed that the hands in which the writing-pad was held were shaking. "Have you had that solid meal this morning?"

"I understand that modern dietitians disapprove of a large meal too early."

"Have you had *anything* to eat today?" Kathleen hadn't the least idea why she was talking to a strange young man in this fashion. She didn't as a rule waste many words on itinerant salesmen at the front door. Yet in a queer muddled manner she was thinking to herself: 'Suppose ten—twelve years hence my John should be penniless—wandering about, trying to sell futile things of this sort—meeting hard-hearted women

like myself who send them about their business. . . .”

“Have you eaten anything at all today?” she asked for the third time. The hands were shaking more pitifully than ever. Kathleen wrenched her eyes away from them. “I take it that you’d like a meal?”

“If you would be so good . . .” His voice was shaking now. Then he managed to steady it and looked up. “Perhaps I could do something for you. Mow the lawn, or chop kindling, or . . .”

“We’ll talk about that later. Come along to the kitchen. You’re not too proud to sit in the kitchen, are you?” She shot a keen glance at him.

He smiled again. “The doss house I’ve patronized—and the Domain—haven’t had the effect of giving me a vastly increased idea of my own importance.”

Piloting him to the kitchen, and ignoring her cook’s surprised and curious glances, she set him down at the table and provided him with cold meat, salad, and bread and butter.

“We’re having morning tea very soon. Mary will give you a cup then, and afterwards I’ll show you what I want done.”

That would be quite enough explanation of his presence to Mary. Before she left the kitchen she had seen the meal begun.

CHAPTER II

DURING the next hour or two, while performing the numerous and varied tasks which were part of her day's work, Mrs. Armitage's thoughts were engaged by the problem of this young and obviously well-educated man whom fate had thrown across her path. Why he should so disturb her equanimity she couldn't imagine. It was more than likely that his predicament was entirely due to some inherent instability. Times weren't so bad nowadays that young men of his type were forced to sleep in the Domain. Besides, there was Relief work, and there were many charitable organizations to which he might apply. Probably drink was his trouble. From his voice she judged him to be an Englishman; very likely a young waster who had given trouble at Home and had been shipped abroad by his people to sink or swim as best he could.

Yet it was the fact that she couldn't reconcile this theory with his appearance—with something intangible in the impression he had made upon her—that troubled her mind. He didn't look weak, or stupid, or dishonest; and the sudden smile which for a second put to flight the bitterness of his handsome face was extraordinarily attractive. In spite, too, of his pallor and leanness, which were readily explained by recent undernourishment and hardship, he seemed as fine a specimen of young manhood as one might hope to see.

How, then, had circumstances conspired to reduce him to such poverty as this?

Kathleen Armitage was not as a rule unduly inquisitive with regard to her fellow-beings' private affairs. Here, however, was a case in which a little curiosity might be pardonable.

She walked down past the pink and white flowering camellia bushes to the lawn where, in the bright sunshine, the strange young man was busy with the mower. He ceased his work at her approach.

It wasn't her way to adopt circuitous methods. She asked him outright if she'd guessed correctly in thinking him an Englishman. In reply he told her that, though he'd been born in Australia, he'd been taken to England as a small boy and educated there. It was less than three years since he had returned here. Both his parents were dead, and he was an only child.

And his name?

There was a second's hesitation before he answered. "Maurice Denning."

"I don't believe you're giving me your real name," Kathleen remarked bluntly.

He looked at her steadily for a moment and then smiled. It was a most disarming smile—as though he pleaded with her not to hold his falsehood against him. "You're quite right," he admitted. "But isn't it a perfectly good name? Won't it do?"

"Haven't you any relatives at all out here?"

Instantly the smile faded, and his mouth grew hard. "None that I wish to remember," he answered.

"You don't want to tell me anything more about yourself? I'm not asking out of idle curiosity. I might be able to help you."

His eyes were on the grass at his feet. "You're awfully good," he said quietly. "I'd like to tell you . . . but please don't ask me."

"Very well, then. You say you can't get work. Would you take any job—any steady job—that was offered you?"

Instantly his head was raised to look her full in the face. "Try me."

"I've just lost my best waitress. Will you take her place?" There was a pause. 'So I was mistaken in him,' thought Kathleen, experiencing a curious sense of disappointment. 'He's just an ordinary loafer—doesn't want work.' Aloud she said, "I see you don't care about the idea."

"It isn't that, but . . . you'd have to take me on trust. I can't give you references."

"Suppose I'm willing to take you on trust?"

"If you'll do that," his voice was a little strained and hoarse, "I swear I won't let you down. And I'm not a fool. I can learn the work quickly enough if you'll show me what you want."

"That's a bargain, then. Can you start today?"

"This moment."

"What about your baggage? Your belongings?"

From his trouser pocket he pulled out a few crumpled pawn tickets. "These—and that"—he pointed to where his coat and the little satchel lay upon the grass—"are all I possess." Suddenly the light faded from his face. "Clothes! You'd want some sort of a waiter's kit. I haven't . . ."

"That's quite all right. I was never without a man-servant until lately, and I've always provided them with white suits. I've a couple of those—not new, but perfectly clean. You won't only have to wait, you know. You'll have to turn your hand to anything. With regard to wages . . ."

"I don't expect anything more than my keep."

"I'd never allow anyone to work for me for nothing," said Kathleen. "And I don't imagine the Labour Union would allow it either. I'm compelled to pay you the award wages. Somewhere about three pounds a week. But you'll have to prove yourself satisfactory. Capable, willing, and sober. Sober above all things. You refused to answer questions and I told you I'd take you on trust. Under those conditions I suppose I'm not entitled to ask if you're addicted to drink?"

Again he smiled. "That's a question I can answer. I don't drink. Like most young fools, I've known what it is to take too many whiskies and cocktails in the past. But I'm not addicted to drink, as you call it, and I'd do my damndest to be the best waiter and handyman you've ever had."

"Put away the mower for the present and collect your things. I'll show you where you sleep. Not very luxurious quarters, but the bed will be warmer on these frosty nights than a bench in the Domain, and, I flatter myself, cleaner than the very best doss house."

She led the way to the back of the house where the old stable, now a garage, stood under the gnarled branches of two Moreton Bay fig trees. A door led into what had once been the harness-room, but was now furnished, somewhat shabbily and poorly, as a bedroom.

"I warned you that it wasn't very grand," she said.

"You don't know how grand it seems to me," he answered simply. "And I can't begin to tell you how grateful . . ."

"Don't begin," returned Kathleen shortly, but her smile softened the brusqueness of her tone. "I'm engaging you because I'm in need of a waiter. And I hope I've found a good one."

"I'll do my best to please you." He laid his coat and satchel on the narrow bed and turned to her. "Who am I to work for?"

"My name is Armitage—Mrs. Armitage. I take boarders. Paying guests is the more refined way of putting it, I believe, but after some years' battle with the world I'm afraid my refinement has worn a trifle thin and I'll admit that this is just an ordinary, common-or-garden boarding-house. I have a cook and two maids at present, and with myself and my mother, the staff have to look after fourteen people. Fifteen at the week-ends, for my boy comes home from school then. A staff of four for fourteen people means fairly heavy work."

"I'm not afraid of work . . . Madam."

Kathleen had some difficulty in concealing her smile at the 'Madam.' It was so obvious that the young man had never used this mode of address before, but was determined to play his part correctly.

"Come into the house now and I'll show you the dining-room and explain how I like things done. There won't be more than half a dozen in to lunch, I expect. As soon as you've got the tables set I'll give you a suit and you can change."

"Thank you, Madam." He followed her into the house by way of the back door. In the kitchen she paused to explain to the cook that this was Maurice, the new waiter, who would take up Biddy's duties.

If fat old Mary were a trifle surprised at the celerity with which Biddy's place had been filled—filled, apparently, before Biddy was out of the house, for the young man had been eating in the kitchen when Biddy had departed—she made no comment. Evidently Madam must have had an inkling that Biddy was dissatisfied. Well, it wasn't her business, decided Mary. She wasn't

sorry to see the last of Biddy, and she always did like a man about the place.

In the dining-room Kathleen found her new waiter quick to grasp what was expected of him; and at last, handing him his suit, and dismissing him to change, she went upstairs to find her mother.

She had already let Denning understand that she did not wish him to explain to anyone the rather peculiar circumstances under which he had been engaged. She herself hadn't the least intention of informing either her mother or any of her boarders that she had taken a stray young man, of whom she knew nothing, into her service. She'd probably tell Peter when next she saw him. Peter had an uncomfortable knack of ferreting out her secrets; and in this case she hadn't the least doubt that Peter would inform her that she'd acted with uncommon foolishness. No, he wouldn't call it 'uncommon' because he was used to what he termed her 'damned impulsiveness.' He'd tell her quite plainly that she deserved to be imposed upon. Perhaps she did. When she'd cut short the young man's expressions of gratitude and announced that she had merely engaged him because she was in need of a waiter she hadn't been speaking the whole truth. She'd wanted to help him quite as much—if not more—than she wanted to help herself.

'Well,' she reflected now as she ascended the stairs. 'the biggest thief I ever had came to me with the most glowing references. Surely, sometimes, one can take people on trust.'

She pushed open the door of her own tiny sitting-room, where Mrs. Montgomery sat at the machine endeavouring to renew the lives of some weary sheets. "Isn't it marvellous, mother! I've managed to secure a

waiter in Bidddy's place. He seems quite a decent young man. Maurice Denning is his name."

"You've been lucky," retorted Mrs. Montgomery.

"Yes, haven't I?" agreed Kathleen. And inwardly she asked herself rather dubiously: 'Have I? Time will tell.'

CHAPTER III

ONLY the footlights and the front row of battens were alight on the dingy old stage of the Prince of Wales Theatre. In the shadows at the back, where the stacked flats—dust begrimed and battered—were leaning against the bare brick wall in a discouraged fashion, about thirty girls whispered together.

An audition was in progress. At the piano near the footlights sat a bored looking young man, and in the stalls of the canvas-draped auditorium Dantry, the producer, and a little group of other men connected with the forthcoming revue exchanged their views on the performers. An unfortunate peroxide-haired young woman, who in spite of her assurance could neither sing nor dance, had been cut short by a shout from Dantry. "Thank you. Next, please."

A dark-eyed girl—obviously extremely nervous—stepped forward from the gloom at the back of the stage towards the piano.

At the first quavering notes of her song Dantry writhed in his stall. "My God!" he ejaculated to Williams, the stage-manager, sitting beside him: "Who sends these nit-wits to me?"

"Perhaps she can dance," suggested Williams, but the tone of his voice expressed very little hope.

"Let's see you dance," shouted Dantry.

After a few words exchanged between the pianist and the dark girl the dance began. This was a decided improvement upon the song. "She's not so bad," said Wil-

liams. "She was too darned nervous to give her voice a chance."

"All right. Put her down for a second audition," said Dantry. "Tell Blane."

Williams held up his hand, signalling to a man in the prompt corner, who advanced to the girl, stopped her dance and led her aside, writing meanwhile in a notebook he carried.

"Next!" roared Dantry, and another girl detached herself from the waiting group at the back and came down to the footlights. She wore no hat, and the lights brought out a glint of red in the soft brown waves of hair framing her piquante little face. Her voice was neither very strong nor remarkable for its range, but it was true and sweet, and she was wise enough to sing only one short verse before starting her dance. Here at any rate was an accomplished dancer. In every graceful movement she seemed to express a spirit of joyous abandon, and her sudden quick smile lit her face to beauty.

"This is a bit better," growled Dantry.

"That's Peggy Vincent," returned Williams. "She's come on a bit since I saw her last. I didn't know she sang, but she certainly ought to be able to dance. She's been in the ballet since she was a kid."

"Doesn't look much more than a kid now."

"About nineteen, I'd say."

"She'll do."

Williams again signalled to the man in the prompt corner, nodding twice this time.

"Next!" shouted Dantry. And still another girl stepped forward.

"You're fixed, Peggy," said the man with the notebook. "Where are you staying? Give me the address."

Peggy gave it.

"Telephone number?"

She gave that also.

"I'll let you know about rehearsals."

"I'm engaged?" Peggy's bright little face was tense with excitement.

"You're engaged."

"But how can you be sure?"

"Williams nodded twice. That means O.K."

"Oh, Tom!" whispered Peggy. "Do you think it's really and truly definite?"

"Of course it is. Why shouldn't it be?"

"Oh, I don't know?"

"Been having a thin time, have you?"

"Fierce."

"You oughtn't ever to be out of a job."

"The trouble is, there've been so few jobs going."

He nodded sympathetically. "I know. The depression and the talkies between them seem to have killed the theatre in this country."

"What sort of a management is it? I don't know anything . . ."

"Can't talk now. Stick around and I'll see you later."

So Peggy 'stuck around' while more and more girls were tried out, accepted or rejected. Though she'd had nothing to eat since breakfast, and it was now after four o'clock, she didn't mind sticking around. Her heart was as light as her little feet. A job at last! Now she'd be able to pay kind Mrs. Armitage. What a dear she'd been! It was nice that Tom Blane was assistant stage-manager. He'd be one friend, anyhow. Nearly all the girls here seemed to be strangers. Most of her old comrades of the ballet were working elsewhere. She'd have been with them if it hadn't been for her illness. Damn

these appendixes. Well, she'd got rid of hers now, thank Heaven! *And* the adhesions! And she'd landed a job. Oh joy!

But suppose it was a dud show and didn't run? No, she wouldn't think of that. Surely she'd had her share of bad luck. Where would she have been if it hadn't been for 'Avalon' and Mrs. Armitage? 'I'll make it up to her someday. I will! I will!' she thought passionately.

The audition was over at last, but Blane seemed to be so engaged with Dantry and Williams—yes, of course, that was Joe Williams. She remembered him in *Sweet Marie*—that she decided she better stick around no longer. Tom Blane had obviously forgotten her existence. He was leaving the stage with the others and making for the office. He'd said he'd let her know about rehearsals. She must be content with that.

Lights were being turned out now, and the stage was practically deserted.

Peggy made her way along the dusty alleyway to the stage-door. The old stage-door keeper looked up from the evening paper, in which he was intently studying the latest racing results, and saw her.

"Hello! It's little Vincent, ain't it?"

"You've said it!" returned Peggy. "Oh, Matthews, how nice to see you again!"

"Where you bin all this long time?"

Peggy made a queer little grimace. "Ill, and then . . . resting."

"Playin' in this 'ere show?"

"Yes." Oh, how wonderful that sounded! But suddenly her face fell. Suppose Blane has been mistaken! "That is, Mr. Blane says I'm engaged," she added more soberly. "I don't really know anything about it. Baldock—the agent—sent me along for an audition."

"I don't know much meself. It's a revue, and a new management. Tryin' it on the dog in the country, so they say. Don't s'pose it'll amount to nothink. Not much chance of its comin' to town."

Peggy's face fell still further. "Let's hope for the best." She endeavoured to speak brightly.

"No 'arm in 'opin'," returned Matthews, picking up his paper again.

But even Matthews' pessimism couldn't depress her for long. 'I've got a job! I've got a job!' Her little feet beat out the refrain in the rhythm of a dance as she made her way along the crowded pavements towards the quay.

From the time—at the age of twelve—that she'd started training for the ballet at Nancy Dymock's school she'd taken it for granted that work would always be forthcoming. The past fifteen months had shown her how fatuous were such easy and pleasant dreams. Nancy had been a brick—allowing her to attend all classes without payment. One must keep up-to-date and in practice with one's dancing or there wouldn't *ever* be any chance of work. But Nancy was an old friend of her mother's. They'd been on the stage together.

At the thought of her mother Peggy's heart contracted once again. Two years hadn't done much to dull the pain of that loss. Why *need* mummy have died? Just a stupid neglected cold, and then pneumonia. And Dad not sending any money. But what could one expect of Dad except airy, light-hearted promises? How he managed to exist at all was a mystery. Always with some hare-brained scheme which was to produce a fortune, and in the meantime losing any spare cash he could lay his hands on—usually mummy's or her own, reflected Peggy—in backing 'also rans.' He *had* taken

them to 'Avalon' for a few weeks in the year before mummy died: that was something to be thankful for! If it hadn't been for that, and her memory of kind Mrs. Armitage, she wouldn't have made her way back there and found a shelter during this awful time when she'd been practically destitute. Nothing she could ever do would repay *darling* Mrs. Armitage! An angel, that's what Mrs. Armitage was! But angel didn't seem, somehow, the right word by which to describe her, decided Peggy. 'Angel' suggested a pious, backboneless, wishy-washy sort of female, without the least sense of humour, and Mrs. Armitage was anything but that! Kind and understanding, yes, but she didn't suffer fools gladly, and she *could* lose her temper occasionally. Marvellous how she ever managed to keep it with some of those cantankerous boarders, and the staff always giving trouble—not to mention her own mother, Mrs. Montgomery, who was for ever bewailing the fact that her daughter should be forced to keep a guest-house after the position they'd held in the early days. 'Society,' that's what they'd been. Government House and all that! But Mrs. Armitage didn't set much store by past grandeur; she just faced things philosophically, and usually managed to see a funny side even to some of her worst worries.

Peggy had reached the quay, and now made her way through the turnstile and on to the crowded ferry-boat. How lovely the harbour was in this sunset light! A golden glow lay on the water and over all the tall massed buildings and every wooded point. The mile-long bridge, with its huge grey pylons and the sweep of its suspended arch, showed up majestically against the tinted clouds.

As the boat moved on over the smooth, opalescent, shining plain Peggy decided that never, *never* had she

seen anything more beautiful! But then, of course, she hadn't seen much. Touring, she'd seen other states, and one other little country, but nothing of the old world. What would it be like to *really* travel? To see London and Paris? How marvellous that would be! Yet however wonderful they were she'd still love this dear city of her birth the best. It was *important*, anyhow! The second largest city of the Empire! Over a million and a quarter inhabitants, she understood. And no one could deny that it was one of the most lovely places in the world. More lovely than ever this evening because . . . she'd got a job!

At the Point, Peggy couldn't wait for the gangway to be swung on board. Together with a few score of other impatient souls she leapt over the intervening yard of water as the ferry grazed the wharf, and in a second was safely ashore. Up the steps cut in the grey rock amongst the big-leaved thorny aloes, and the flame trees, she hurried, and in at the rusty iron gate of 'Avalon.'

Kathleen Armitage had just descended the stairs as Peggy entered the hall. With a whoop of joy the little dancer hurled herself at the older woman and clasped her round the neck. "I've got it!"

"Peggy! You're strangling me. Let go! I suppose this means you've secured an engagement."

"Isn't it *marvellous*?"

"Not at all. Why shouldn't you get an engagement? I told you all along it was only a matter of waiting. Peggy! *Will* you be quiet? Nasty wet kisses."

"They're dry. Dry as a thousand bones. Lots of people would give their *eyes* for them, let me tell you."

"I haven't noticed them queuing up."

"But you don't see everything."

"No, thank Heaven."

"And let me tell you further that . . ." she stepped back suddenly and landed with all her weight—which certainly was not excessive—on the toes of a tall young man in a white suit. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she ejaculated. "I hope I haven't absolutely *maimed* you."

The young man smiled at her. "Not absolutely," he answered gravely. Then turning to Kathleen he went on: "Mary—I should say, chef—would like to speak to you for a moment, Madam."

"I'll come out to the kitchen," said Kathleen, and the young man retired.

"Who's that?" whispered Peggy.

"My new waiter. Maurice is his name. Biddy left this morning and he's taken her place."

"He doesn't *look* like a waiter," observed Peggy. "He's so handsome."

"I see no reason why a waiter shouldn't be handsome."

"But not like that! He's *distinguished*!"

Kathleen laughed. "Don't be absurd. Besides," she added sententiously, "handsome is as handsome does."

"And how does he?"

"Very well, so far. Now run upstairs quickly and change or you'll be late for dinner. I must go and see what chef wants. Sit at my table tonight and then you can tell me all your news. Off you go!"

With one last frantic hug Peggy bounded off up the stairs to her own small room.

CHAPTER IV

WITH the exception of Doctor and Mrs. Rayner, who were dining in town this evening with friends, all the guests at 'Avalon' took their accustomed places at the small tables in the old-fashioned but comfortably furnished dining-room soon after the gong had summoned them.

Those who had spent some years as 'paying guests' in different establishments were usually seated before the echoes of the gong had died away. Mrs. Armitage had come to recognize the 'old-timers' by this particular trait. They were afraid that the 'roast duckling' or 'spring chicken' might be 'off' if they delayed.

Kathleen, while listening to Peggy's excited chatter, was still aware of all that was going on around her. This 'awareness' had become habitual with her—especially at meal-times. She had learned that it was necessary to keep an eye on the service and to be sure that all her guests were attended to promptly and efficiently.

Tonight she was a trifle more anxious than usual, wondering how her new waiter was to acquit himself.

To her relief he seemed to be both quick and deft. He had forgotten none of her instructions. Colonel Mulholland's whiskey and soda; Mr. and Mrs. Butters' bottle of wine; Miss Hobhouse's special cup of tea, which she expected directly after the soup; were all provided. He was playing his part well. After all, if a young man had been accustomed to dining in first-class restaurants—and she shrewdly suspected that this young man had

had money enough in the past—he would possess ample knowledge of the duties of a good waiter.

He moved about amongst the small tables without losing for a moment his air of complete detachment, yet dealing competently with every request. Even the exuberance of Charlie Moss, who addressed him as 'George' and told him to 'step on it,' produced no change in his demeanour. "I've got to get back to work," said Charlie Moss, "so I want my coffee here, not in the lounge. And I want it with the fruit salad. See?"

"Black or white, Sir?"

"White, and look slippy."

A few seconds later both the fruit salad and the coffee were set down on the table before young Moss.

Peggy, in spite of her absorption in her own good luck, was immensely intrigued with the new waiter. "He ought to be on the stage," she whispered to Kathleen.

'Yes,' thought Mrs. Armitage, with a slightly cynical inward smile, 'he's certainly giving an excellent performance tonight with his "Yes, Sirs" and "No, Madams"', but aloud she said, "Why wish to transform a perfectly good waiter into a probably very bad actor?"

"I don't believe he'd be a very bad actor," returned Peggy obstinately. "I believe he'd be a very good one. He moves like a dancer, anyhow."

"A dancer isn't necessarily an actor."

"Well, this dancer—me—is an actress," retorted Peggy, with her quick, flashing little smile. "I am *really*, Mrs. Armitage. You mayn't believe it, but I *can* act."

"I'm not disputing that. What I'm protesting against is your mania for believing others would shine upon the

boards. I remember you were once convinced that I should have taken up your profession."

"So you should. At least, I mean you'd have been wonderful on the stage. You've got personality, and brains, and beauty."

"Oh, get along with you, Peggy," laughed Kathleen. "There must be a local blarney-stone you've ferreted out and kissed."

"Kathleen could have made a success of anything," put in Mrs. Montgomery. She wasn't over-fond of little Peggy Vincent, but she was in entire agreement with her in her praise of Kathleen.

"I don't know that I'm an overwhelming success as a boarding-house keeper."

"I wish you wouldn't use that expression, Kathleen," observed Mrs. Montgomery crossly. "You have a guest-house, and if it isn't a very great financial success, it's only because you weren't brought up to earn your own living. You're far too soft-hearted with everyone and too easily imposed upon."

"Let's go and have our coffee." Putting an end to the discussion, Kathleen rose and led the way out of the dining-room, across the hall and into the lounge, where Maurice was handing round the coffee tray.

"How about bridge, Mulholland? Feel like a rubber?" asked Mr. Butters. He and his wife were enthusiastic followers of Mr. Culbertson.

"Yes, I'll play," returned the Colonel, "provided you've got a decent fourth. I won't play with that Walsh woman. She doesn't know the first thing about the game."

"We'll get Tilling. He's not going out tonight."

Young Henry Tilling, the bank clerk, was roped in, and the four settled down to their game.

Clara Walsh and her daughter Joan, whose fair pretti-

ness was marred by a perpetual look of discontent, stood talking to Peggy and Mrs. Armitage.

"You're going all navyish tonight, aren't you, Joan?" observed Kathleen. "Where's the dance? On the *Illawarra* at Garden Island, isn't it?"

Joan nodded languidly. "Yes."

"She's got the *sweetest* frock, Kathleen. Of course, being her mother, I oughtn't to say so, but she looks an absolute *dream* in it."

"I'm sure she does. How do you get there, Joan?"

"They're sending a pinnace to the wharf," returned Joan indifferently.

"Joan's frightfully popular with the Navy." Mrs. Walsh beamed upon her daughter. "The other day at the Government House garden party one of the aides told me that she was the toast of the Fleet."

"Oh, mummy!" protested Joan. But it was quite evident that she didn't really object to any complimentary remarks being broadcast in this fashion.

"I don't think *that's* a very nice thing to call her," said Peggy.

"What do you mean?" queried Mrs. Walsh.

"Well, it might be another way of calling her 'hot stuff,' mightn't it? Toast usually is—unless, of course, it's got cold and flabby."

"A 'toast' means . . ."

"She's being funny, mummy."

"I don't see any fun in vulgar slang," said Clara Walsh. "Naval men don't use the sort of expressions you're familiar with on the stage, Peggy."

"Oh, don't they?" returned Peggy meekly. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. Let's have a look at you when you're dressed, Joan. Aren't you lucky." She sighed. "I wish *I* were the pet of the Fleet."

"I said 'toast.'" Mrs. Walsh, as usual, was losing her temper with Peggy.

"I know, but I said 'pet.' I could never hope to be the toast."

"Peggy's got an engagement," put in Kathleen, by way of a digression.

"What in?" asked Joan.

"A new revue."

"Is it a good part?"

"Oh, only chorus. I had an audition today."

"They've been trying to persuade me to let Joan go on the films," announced Mrs. Walsh. "But I don't like the idea at all."

Poor old Clara! thought Kathleen. She'd always been a fool, even in the old days at school. Adversity—the loss of her husband and practically all her fortune—didn't seem to have taught her anything. Here she was, lying valiantly in defence of her one ewe lamb who was crazy to become a film star and who had been rejected by every company in town. Why, oh why did some foolish mothers make doormats of themselves for the feet of their selfish, pretty daughters? Kathleen had a shrewd suspicion that the purchase of this new dress for Joan would mean a request from Clara to her in private to let next week's bill stand over for the time being. And Clara was still in her debt. Not that she ever spent anything on herself, poor thing! She'd gone to the Government House garden party looking *too* deplorable! Why did she attempt to keep up with the wealthy people she had known in the old days? It wasn't as though they were intimate friends. Clara had never been popular. Very few people could be bothered with her. Yet here she was, clinging desperately to the skirts of the fashionable throng and still believing her-

self one of them. Sad, really! What was to become of her later if Joan failed to make a good marriage? And in spite of her mother's fatuous admiration, Joan wasn't really as great a social success as Mrs. Walsh believed. As a matter of fact Kathleen had heard that she was nicknamed 'the sea-gull'—the follower of the fleet—rather than 'the toast.'

Miss Hobhouse, seated as usual in the most comfortable chair in the room, looked up as Kathleen passed. "What's become of Biddy, Mrs. Armitage?"

"She left this morning."

"Nothing *wrong*, I hope?" The tone of Miss Hobhouse's voice belied her words. It was quite evident that she hoped otherwise.

"Oh, no," said Kathleen easily. "She was inclined to be independent and always resented being spoken to. I had a little difference of opinion with her this morning and she took herself off."

"And you've got a waiter in her place?"

"Yes."

"You know, it's a funny thing," said Miss Hobhouse, eyeing Kathleen narrowly, "Mrs. Epping and I were both convinced that the young man you've engaged was a hawker."

"Really?"

"Yes. We were sitting in the garden this morning and we saw him come in at the gate. He undid a little bag he carried and pulled some things out. I thought he'd got a writing-pad and envelopes and some soap in his hands."

"He brought his personal belongings with him."

"Queer things for him to be carrying."

Kathleen managed to laugh quite naturally. "I usually carry writing materials and my own soap when

I move from place to place. Don't you? Not that I often do move, worse luck. I wish I could manage to take a holiday. Did I tell you I had a letter yesterday from Mrs. Weston? Isn't she lucky, getting that trip to the Islands? She's enjoying it tremendously, but she's coming back here when she returns." Without giving Miss Hobhouse an opportunity to cross-examine her further on the subject of the new waiter, Kathleen moved off. 'Those two old wretches,' she thought. 'There's nothing too small or too petty for them to gossip over. They probably won't rest now until they've discovered that I engaged that young man "off the street," as they'd put it. Well, let them gossip. They won't get any satisfaction out of me if I can help it, nor out of Maurice, unless I'm much mistaken!'

The young man in question re-entered the room at this moment and came towards her. "Miss Vincent is wanted on the telephone," he announced.

"Perhaps that's about rehearsals," exclaimed Peggy, making a dash for the door.

In the hall she grabbed at the receiver. "Hello!"

A voice answered her. "That you, Peggy?"

"Yes."

"It's Blane here. Rehearsal tomorrow, ten-thirty."

"Oh, Tom, how lovely!"

"Is it? You're the first person I've ever known who thought rehearsals lovely."

"Yes, but don't you see . . ."

"At the theatre, ten-thirty sharp."

"I'll be there."

"Good oh. So long." Tom evidently wasn't wasting any more time on conversation, but Peggy was too elated to bother her head about that. Replacing the receiver,

she pirouetted swiftly round, and for the second time collided with Maurice, the waiter.

He was carrying the tray of empty coffee cups and there was a rattle of crockery.

"I'm most *frightfully* sorry," she exclaimed. "I seem determined to run you down tonight. I didn't smash anything, did I?"

"Nothing." He endeavoured to replace the overturned cups.

"You see, I'm so *terribly* excited. I've got a job. That was about rehearsals—that phone message. I'm an actress—at least, a dancer—and I've been 'out' for ages, and it's been awful. Look! There's a spoon on the floor." She stooped with a quick, lithe movement and picked it up. As she replaced it on the tray their eyes met. "You're not really a waiter, are you." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact.

"Have I shown myself so incompetent?"

"No," said Peggy hurriedly. "Forgive me, please. I'm a blundering little idiot. I think I know how it is. You were out of work—out of luck—like me."

"That's true, but I'm a servant here. I'd rather no one imagined . . ."

"I'm not going to tell others what I think," returned Peggy quickly. "Not even darling Mrs. Armitage."

"You like her?"

"I love her. She's been the best friend I've ever met. If it hadn't been for her I . . . I can't think *what* would have happened to me."

"It's good to know there's a spot of kindness to be found somewhere in the world."

"Oh, but there's lots really. Not that you'd find many people like Mrs. Armitage. No, not one *really*. She's so understanding, and such fun, and so *kind*. I wish I

could win the Melbourne Cup—the sweep, you know—and give her the loveliest, *loveliest* time.”

“Perhaps you will.”

“I haven’t had the money to buy a ticket in it.”

“That’s unfortunate. Under those circumstances it isn’t altogether probable that you *will* win.” Carrying the tray, he passed down the hall and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

CHAPTER V

THE interview with Gordon Bates, her solicitor, had been disturbing. Kathleen, walking that afternoon under the covered colonnade of the post office, had no eyes for the vivid splashes of colour from the flower-stalls set in line along the pavement.

Her mind, fully occupied with her own problems, was oblivious of the passers-by; the stream of traffic in which the gaily painted taxis—purple, orange, blue, and scarlet—threaded their way swiftly past green-hued trams.

Money must certainly be found somewhere to pay the interest on the 'Avalon' mortgage. She had depended upon the sale of her Quintos shares to meet this liability, and to her dismay now learned that Quintos had slumped badly. Bates informed her that it was madness to attempt to sell at the present moment. They would pick up again, of that he was convinced. It was only a question of 'hanging on.'

But a very difficult question that seemed to be. In what direction could she economize? Send John to a cheaper school? That would make a certain small difference, but she was very loth to do it. He was happy where he was and getting on well. Give Mary notice and take on the chef's job herself? This expedient, she was convinced, would be bad policy. Work for which she was now responsible would be left undone and the whole tone of the place would be lowered. Besides, she wasn't really a first-class cook, and good food was essential in her business. Why, oh why couldn't she

fill those empty rooms of hers? With the house full 'Avalon' provided a living for herself and her mother and her son. Not a very opulent living, it is true, but sufficient to provide for them all in comfort. Yet lately, it seemed, she'd been losing money.

Well, such a state of affairs couldn't last. Much as she disliked doing so, she must advertise. Hitherto she had been able to run her establishment without making it plain to all and sundry that she was in need of more paying guests. This lack of funds was only a temporary embarrassment, she felt convinced. And so did Gordon Bates. He assured her that the ready cash needed was a small matter and could be raised somewhere. Yes, but where?

Mrs. Armitage walked on through the stream of busy pedestrians, absorbed in her own worrying thoughts.

"No, you don't!" said a voice beside her. "You can't pass a friend with your nose in the air like that!"

Kathleen halted abruptly and then laughed. "Was it in the air? I shouldn't have thought it. To tell the truth, I was feeling a trifle hang-dogish." She was absurdly glad to see Peter. It was weeks since they had met. Why hadn't she thought of calling at his office? But she couldn't have produced any valid excuse for doing that even if the idea had occurred to her.

"You know the antidote for hang-dogism?"

"No."

"A good stiff cocktail. Come along with me."

"But I've just had a cup of tea with Gordon Bates, and I've one or two things I ought to do."

"So have I. But I shan't do them. Not just now, anyhow." He hailed a passing taxi. "Hop in."

Arguing with Peter had always been a waste of time, and to Kathleen, in her present mood, the thought of a

little time alone with a good friend was a blessed relief. "Where are we going?"

"To a place I know. Quite respectable, my dear, even if I'm not."

"Who says you aren't?"

He laughed. She always found that laugh infectious. She liked the way the tanned skin puckered round his clear hazel eyes when he was amused. "Who says so? Many people. Your mother, for one, and probably you for another."

"I don't quite know what you mean by 'respectable.'"

"Oh yes, you do, my dear. A married man who has strayed from the straight and narrow can't possibly lay any claim to respectability."

Kathleen was silent. She knew quite well that Peter Craig's name was anathema to Mrs. Montgomery. He'd been on her black list since Kathleen and he had been young together. Surely there wasn't anything discreditable against him then? And even now, what was his heinous offence? He'd 'kept' a woman who wasn't his wife. All his acquaintances knew that; but most of his more intimate friends knew also that poor, frail little Amy, with a heart that was liable to stop for ever at the least hint of exertion or excitement, should never have been allowed to marry at all. No one could deny that Peter had cared for Amy—had given her the only life possible to her, a sheltered, carefree existence. But he'd given himself to another woman—that was his unforgivable sin in Mrs. Montgomery's eyes. Kathleen never allowed herself to be drawn into an argument with her mother on the subject of Peter and his matrimonial affairs. She knew that her mother would be shocked beyond measure to know that she had never felt Peter to be in the least blameworthy. What other course was

possible to him under the circumstances? A life of celibacy? Apparently to Mrs. Montgomery, and many others who shared her views, the sin would have been lessened had Peter not quite so openly defied convention. Why he did so, and why now that Amy was dead he did not marry the woman with whom he had lived so long, were questions which Kathleen felt no one had any business to ask.

She valued his friendship, and as far as she could judge, he valued hers. That was all that mattered between them.

"Well," said Craig now. "Evidently the sight of me hasn't cheered you appreciably. What's the trouble?"

She turned to him, smiling. "Little domestic worries. Nothing of any consequence."

"John?"

"Oh no. John's as fit as a fiddle, and he's always as good as gold."

He shook his head. "Don't you believe it. John's a fine youngster, but no boy worth his salt is as good as gold. I'll guarantee John gets into a hell of a lot of mischief that you know nothing about."

"Probably. The little things aren't important as long as he keeps straight in the big ones."

"And what are the big ones?"

"First of all, I think, honesty—honesty with yourself, I mean. Not covering up your own motives—excusing your own faults."

"‘To thine own self be true,’ as Mr. Shakespeare has it. Well, what next?"

"Courage. But then that comes in with honesty. You've got to have courage to be honest with yourself."

"What else?"

"Kindness, and—probably you'll jeer at this—humility."

"Why should I jeer?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's a word that has been looked down on quite a lot. But real humility—I mean not being eaten up with a sense of your own importance—is quite a lovely thing, I believe."

He looked at her for a moment in silence, then he said quietly: "You're a very lovely thing yourself, Kathleen. Have I ever told you that before?"

She was so surprised at the unexpected compliment—which was utterly unlike his usual teasing bluntness—that, to her own dismay, she felt a little colour rising in her cheeks. Good Heavens! Blushing like a simpering schoolgirl! How ridiculous!

Hoping that he hadn't noticed her embarrassment, she remarked lightly, "No, you've never told me that before, but better late than never."

The taxi stopped. "Here we are," said Craig, and in another moment led the way down a few stairs to a somewhat over-decorated restaurant where, under the shaded electric lights, a number of small tables were set about a dancing floor. Most of the tables were occupied, but only a few couples waltzed to the music of the band.

When they had found a vacant table and were seated together, with the cocktails before them, Craig looked at her sharply. "Now for the little domestic worries."

"They're not worth talking about," returned Kathleen. In all her confidences to Peter she had never led him to believe that she was in monetary difficulties. In truth, up to the present time, she had not really been harassed for want of ready cash. Peter would probably feel it his duty—though Heaven alone knew why he

should for so many years have taken it upon himself to act the part of a somewhat cynical elder brother—to offer her a loan. To bring the question of money into their friendship would ruin her feeling of complete ease in his company. Besides, though Peter might be very comfortably off—(who would ever have thought that the poor lad who worked as a wool-classer in those far-off days when she herself was a girl would have built up for himself a substantial wool-buying business?)—he, too, must have his financial anxieties. During the depression things had not been altogether easy for the wool trade, and keeping two establishments going was a tax on any man. Though Mrs. Deans hadn't returned with him from London after his last trip Home, no doubt she cost him more 'abroad' than she would do in his own native land.

No, Kathleen decided, wild horses wouldn't drag from her any hint as to her monetary embarrassment. Wild horses might not, but Peter Craig might! She must be careful.

"Your hash-house isn't doing too well, eh? Is that the trouble?"

"How dare you call it a hash-house. I keep what is popularly known as a 'First-Class Table.' My chef is excellent. I *never* offer my guests hash."

"Personally I'm rather partial to a stew of sorts. But then I have low tastes. Wouldn't you stretch a point and let me have some if I came to you as a P.G.?"

"If you came I'd see that you had it on every possible occasion."

"Shall I come?"

"Don't be absurd."

"What's so absurd about it? I'm sick of living at the club."

"I can't see you" (and Mrs. Deans, she mentally added) "installed in any boarding-house."

"Perhaps you're right. Anyhow, your mother wouldn't admit me. She's always had her knife into me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it happens to be true. She's hated me for years."

"I wish you wouldn't talk in that way."

"All right, my dear, I won't. But I'm only acting up to your expressed desire for honesty. Tell me your troubles."

"Oh, one's never without petty worries in my job."

"Staff?"

"No, thank goodness, my staff is satisfactory at present. I've got a young man as a waiter who is a treasure. The best house-man I've ever had."

"I've heard that tale before. How long has he been with you?"

"Six weeks."

"The cloven hoof may yet appear."

"Need you be so depressing?"

He laughed. "My dear girl, how many of your swans have turned out to be geese? Most dangerous geese, some of them. Birds of prey, in fact. Do you remember your Russian guardsman who attacked the cook with a carving knife and tried to set fire to the house?"

"That was a long time ago," returned Kathleen defensively. "This young man is . . . well, I can't exactly describe him, but he's obviously a gentleman."

"So was the Russian."

"Maurice is different. I'm desperately sorry for him."

Craig groaned. "Oh, Kathleen, Kathleen! You and

your lame dogs! I wonder you haven't developed hydrophobia long ago. The savage bites you've had!"

"Aren't you getting a bit mixed with geese and swans and lame dogs? Anyhow, I'd rather be bitten occasionally than chase all the poor unfortunates away from my door."

"Yes, I believe you would. So this young man's another lame dog, is he?"

"I never said so."

"You implied it. Where did you pick him up?"

She might as well be frank. Peter would worm the story out of her sooner or later. So she told him of the peculiar circumstances under which she had engaged her new waiter. But in reply to his questions she had to admit that she was still as ignorant of the young man's past history as she had been at first. "He's suffered from some injustice—or thinks he has. He's been nursing his grievances. I told him once that he seemed to be keeping them as pets, but that grievances were dangerous animals to cherish."

Craig laughed. "Don't you ever allow yourself the pleasure of a little rancour?"

"Often, but I'm wise enough to realize that it hurts me a great deal more than it hurts anyone else."

"And do you think you've persuaded your young man to an agreement with your philosophic views?"

"At least he seems a little less unhappy."

"He's probably preparing some grand coup against you. Why should he give you a false name if he hadn't something to hide? No, my dear, you'll discover, I'm afraid, that he's a crook, and he'll decamp one night with most of the family silver."

Kathleen made a wry little face. "There isn't so much of that left now."

"A succession of lame dogs having borne it off in mistake for bones, eh?"

"Oh, it disappears somehow. Mother locks up what remains, so there's no danger of the last of it going."

"Then he'll steal the guests' jewellery."

"I'm sure he won't."

"You don't worry about John or your staff, so what is it you *do* worry about?"

"A few empty rooms, that's all. But they'll fill up. 'Avalon' has a very good name, you know, in spite of the fact that it's not as modern and up-to-date as some places." And then to divert the conversation from her own personal affairs she went on, "You've heard me speak of Peggy Vincent?"

"The little dancer?"

"Yes. She and her father and mother stayed with me some years ago, and then, after the mother died, Peggy was very down on her luck and came back to me."

"Naturally," said Craig dryly.

Kathleen laughed. "You're very ridiculous. And as it happens Peggy's case refutes your argument as to the savage ingratitude of my lame dogs. She's secured an engagement in a new revue which is being tried out in the country. And the poor child is sending me money out of her small salary every week."

"How many weeks?"

"Three," said Kathleen. "They've only been on tour a short time."

"You'll probably find that next week you'll receive an excuse instead of a money order."

"Nothing you can say will kill my faith in Peggy."

"No, I don't suppose it will. What's the show she's with?"

"*Southern Belles*, I think they call it. They're opening at the old Prince of Wales Theatre later."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"What do you mean?" enquired Kathleen anxiously.

"I've been asked to put money into it. The syndicate need more capital before they open in town."

"I didn't know you were interested in theatrical matters."

"I'm interested in any speculation that seems likely to show a profit. I always was a bit of a gambler, you know."

"And do you think this particular revue is a good gamble?"

"It may be. They've done quite fair business so far. I'm going into the country on my own business shortly and I'll see a performance and judge for myself."

"Then you must meet Peggy," exclaimed Kathleen. "You might be able to do something for her—get her a little part. She's only in the chorus, and dancing in the ballet now."

He shook his head. "Even if I decide to put money into the show I shouldn't dream of meddling with the production. That's Dantry's job."

"Well, introduce yourself to her, at any rate. Being on good terms with a prospective backer ought to put up her stock with the management."

"How keen you are to advance your protégées. You don't want me to try and secure a leading part for your mysterious young waiter, do you?"

"No, thanks, he's doing very well where he is."

"Another cocktail?"

She shook her head.

"You'll have another after we've danced."

"Good gracious! I haven't danced for years."

"Quite time you began again then. Come along. We used to get on well enough together in the past."

"I'm not up in rumbas and tangoes."

"Neither am I. This is an ordinary fox-trot. Come on."

Well, why not? thought Kathleen. It must be at least ten years since she'd last danced with Peter. That was before Amy died. But he'd always been one of her favourite partners.

She rose, and they glided out together over the smooth floor.

Perhaps it was only the exhilarating effect of the cocktail and the rhythm of the music, but her worries now seemed to be forgotten. Life took on a more rosy glow. Absurd, of course, that she should be spending her afternoon in this fashion, but absurd or not, she was enjoying it.

"And now I really must depart," she said as the music ceased.

"You won't change your mind about another cocktail?"

"One's quite enough, thank you. I don't want to destroy my reputation at 'Avalon' by arriving home in an inebriated condition."

"Two cocktails surely wouldn't have that effect."

"One's enough, and I've got at least an hour's round in all sorts of directions before I catch my boat."

"What a stern disciplinarian you are, Kathleen."

"Life's made me a trifle grim."

He looked at her for a moment as though he meant to say something in reply to this and then apparently changed his mind.

"Very well, if you won't, you won't. I'll put you into a taxi."

"I can walk, or take a tram."

"Nonsense. A taxi will save your time."

He piloted her up the steps, again hailed one of the gaily painted taxis, put her in and handed the driver some loose silver. "You're set now for over an hour's round," he said. "And you can do your jobs in comfort. We'll repeat this afternoon's performance soon again, shall we?"

"Perhaps," said Kathleen non-committally. What would Mrs. Montgomery have to say if it ever came to her ears that her daughter was making a practice of drinking cocktails and dancing with Peter Craig during her free afternoons? Kathleen smiled as the thought occurred to her.

But as the taxi moved forward, and she waved her farewell to Peter, she reflected that this short interlude had cheered her immeasurably. How pleasant it was—if only for one afternoon—to be looked after, to have decisions made for one like this!

Somewhat startled, and with a small feeling of guilt, Kathleen suddenly realized that she had been deciding in her own mind that Mrs. Deans was an exceedingly lucky woman.

CHAPTER VI

ON reaching home that evening Kathleen was met in the hall by Mrs. Montgomery. It was quite evident that something untoward had happened. Kathleen's heart sank. What was it now?

"Why on earth are you so late, Kathleen? I've been watching every boat come in. You told me that you expected to be home before five. We've had the most awful upset here. Come upstairs. I can't talk in the hall. And why didn't you tell me where I might find you in town? I've telephoned to everyone I could think of. You said you might lunch with Mary Foster, but she hadn't seen you."

They were together in their own small sitting-room, and free from interruption, when Mrs. Montgomery began her tale. The old lady was far too agitated to give a very coherent account of all that had occurred since her daughter had crossed to the city that morning, and for some time Kathleen found it difficult to discover what actually had happened. It appeared that just after Kathleen's departure from home Miss Hobhouse had missed a very valuable ring.

"She says it's valuable," commented Mrs. Montgomery, "but I shouldn't think it's worth more than a few pounds."

Miss Hobhouse had taken off the ring while washing her hands in the bathroom, and on her return to retrieve it a few moments later it had disappeared. Everyone in the house was questioned. All the staff interrogated. Miss Hobhouse was determined that the ring should be

recovered, and after luncheon, unknown to Mrs. Montgomery, rang up the police. A detective, or some such person, had arrived on the scene, and . . . well, the long and the short of it was that, after everyone had been thoroughly upset, the ring had been discovered on the floor, wedged in behind the pedestal of the basin. "She probably whisked it off with the towel," said Mrs. Montgomery.

All very unpleasant, agreed Kathleen, but if the ring had been found there wasn't much harm done, surely?

But this was only the beginning of the trouble, it seemed. Before the ring had been recovered all sorts of other complications had arisen. In the course of his enquiries the constable, or detective, or whoever he was ("A most bumptious, disagreeable man," said Mrs. Montgomery), had singled out for particular attention Maurice, the waiter.

At the end of a long and painful interview, during which this representative of the police had demanded from Maurice all particulars concerning himself, and received no satisfaction, he had declared to Miss Hobhouse and herself privately that the man they knew as Denning was a criminal. Of that he was certain. He wasn't sure what the man had been doing time *for*, but he knew he'd seen him less than six months ago in gaol.

"Where did you get him from, Kathleen? What were his references?"

Kathleen made no direct reply to this. "If Miss Hobhouse found her ring, how on earth does this cock-and-bull story affect us?"

After the ring was found, explained Mrs. Montgomery, and the constable, or detective, or sergeant, or whoever he was, had departed, Miss Hobhouse made a most awful scene. Both she and Mrs. Epping declared

they wouldn't stay a moment longer in the house unless Maurice left.

"And did they go?"

"Oh, no. Maurice went. He handed me his last week's wages to give to you and took himself off."

"And so, because that old idiot of a Hobhouse drops her ring on the floor, I have my entire staff upset and lose a perfectly good manservant!" exclaimed Kathleen furiously. "Why on earth didn't you take them at their word and let them go—those two insufferable old cats!"

"Don't talk like that, Kathleen! I'm ashamed of you! Surely you wouldn't want to keep a thief in the house?"

"Who says he's a thief? The very fact that he handed you back this money proves him honest."

"You had a right to it."

"And what chance should I have had of recovering it if he hadn't, of his own free will, given it up? No thief would have done that. Surely you don't condemn him because a self-opinionated policeman imagines he's seen him in gaol?"

"Well, I don't know anything about him, and I don't believe you do either."

"I know that I would trust him. One must rely on one's own judgment of people's characters."

"I'd prefer a few good references," retorted Mrs. Montgomery dryly. "And I'd be glad to hear from you that you saw them. You're a soft-hearted fool, Kathleen. Anyone can get round you. Personally I consider it's a very good thing that the young man has taken his departure. I've been all over the house since he left to make sure that he's taken nothing else."

"I hope you are satisfied on that score," remarked Kathleen coldly.

"Yes, as far as I can judge at present there's nothing

missing. And, Kathleen, in future will you kindly display a little more sense when you're engaging . . ."

"Please, mother, don't let us discuss the matter any further. I'm cross and tired, and I'll probably say things I shall regret if we continue to argue. I must go down and make arrangements for serving dinner. Vera will have to take Maurice's place in the dining-room." She left the room abruptly; and busily engaged behind the scenes in the servery, did not put in an appearance at dinner.

Later, however, when coffee was brought into the lounge, she joined her guests. She knew that sooner or later she would have to hear the full story—with embellishments—from Miss Hobhouse and her crony, Mrs. Epping. Better get it over now.

As politely as she could she listened to their tale, and though she was hard put to it—without uttering deliberate falsehoods—to counter their curiosity as to how the young man came to enter her service, she succeeded in baulking their efforts to obtain information.

"I've always made it a rule," she remarked serenely, "never to discuss my business arrangements, and the short-comings of my staff, with my guests. But, of course, none of you are anxious to gossip on such trivial matters."

"I don't call it a trivial matter that you employed here a man who is a criminal," replied Miss Hobhouse tartly.

"But have you any proof that he is a criminal? Don't you think, Miss Hobhouse, it would have been very much wiser to have made a thorough search for your property before ringing up the police? You seem apt to jump too quickly to erroneous conclusions. I must confess I have been rather annoyed over the whole affair,

but perhaps the less said about the matter the better." She moved away from Miss Hobhouse and left this lady fuming. Well, let her fume! And let her go if she wanted to! Tonight Kathleen didn't feel she cared very much if every one of her boarders departed.

But Miss Hobhouse wouldn't leave! Not she! She was living more comfortably and cheaply here than she could live anywhere else, and she was perfectly well aware of the fact.

Yet, though she could effectually put a stop to any further discussion of Maurice Denning between herself and Miss Hobhouse, Kathleen was not so successful in this respect with regard to her mother. Mrs. Montgomery was determined to say all she could in detraction of the young man's character. Later in the evening she gave her daughter to understand that not only did she believe the young man to be dishonest, but a person of loose morals as well. In this connection she included Peggy Vincent; and she wasn't quite sure whom she blamed most—Peggy or Denning—for giving people cause for gossip.

"If you mean Hobhouse and Epping, they're never stumped for 'cause.' They'll gossip without it."

"Of course with a girl like that, dragged up on the stage, one can't expect discrimination, but she became much too friendly with that young man. Miss Hobhouse and Mrs. Epping weren't the only ones who noticed it."

"You're not inferring, surely, that there was anything wrong in their friendship?"

"I don't know I'm sure how far their friendship, as you call it, went. All I say is she shouldn't have been on such familiar terms with him."

"Why not? His accepting the position of manservant

doesn't make him any less a gentleman, does it? No one could speak to him for five minutes without realizing that he was well-born and well educated. According to your argument both you and I can now lay no claim to being gentlewomen. We're boarding-house keepers."

"That's nonsense. Peggy should have had sense enough to understand that no guests in this house ought to put themselves on the same level as the staff. And if, as you say, the young man is a gentleman, it's extremely suspicious that the only job open to him was a menial one. That in itself is proof enough to me that the policeman was speaking the truth. I'm thankful now that you happened to be out today and I was able to get rid of him. There's no knowing where your folly might have landed you."

"So you dismissed him?"

Mrs. Montgomery was for a moment slightly taken aback by this abrupt question. "He'd enough sense—or probably fear of discovery—to accept a hint . . ."

"Mother, please understand that 'Avalon' can only have one mistress. If you want to take on the management of the house John and I can find a home elsewhere."

"Kathleen, how can you be so cruel and unfeeling?"

"I'm sorry, mother. But do please let us drop the subject of my waiter. He's gone, and I must find someone to take his place first thing in the morning. I'm going to bed now. Good-night." She crossed the little sitting-room and kissed her mother. "I'm sorry I've been so disagreeable, mother dear, but I've had a worrying day. You must forgive me."

Directly after breakfast next morning Kathleen, at the telephone, was in communication with the various

registry offices where in the past she had secured maids. She made appointments to see an elderly waitress who was disengaged and a young, untrained girl from the country. She'd have to put up with one or other of them if either was willing to come.

Through the open hall door came the cheerful sound of the postman's whistle, and Kathleen moved out into the sunshine—brilliant and warm already, although the short winter was not yet ended.

The whistle might *sound* cheerful, she reflected, but the contents of the box—as far as she herself was concerned—was usually distinctly depressing. Bills! How they did accumulate, these wretched accounts. Yes, here they were! At least half a dozen of them. As she walked slowly back to the house she sorted out the envelopes addressed to her guests and opened one or two of her own. Then she came upon one which did not look altogether like a bill. It was not typed, and though the stationery was poor, there wasn't the flimsy feeling about it which she had learned to associate with 'a remittance will oblige.'

She tore this letter open and found within three closely written pages. Who was her correspondent? She didn't recognize the handwriting, so turned to the last page and saw the initials M.D.

M.D.? Maurice Denning, of course.

A little glow of pleasure and relief swept through her. Though she had not acknowledged it, even to herself, she was aware now that she had been wounded by the fact that he had gone without a word to her—no indication of where she might communicate with him.

There was no address at the head of the page she looked at now. Merely yesterday's date and the

beginning, 'Dear Mrs. Armitage.' She read on quickly. 'You will have learned the reason of my abrupt departure before this reaches you, but after all your kindness to me I feel that I must make some explanation—tell you some of those things concerning myself (whether they are of any interest to you or not) which I refused to tell you six weeks ago. I wish I hadn't been forced to leave you in the lurch like this. I'm not good at expressing gratitude, and you'll think that my conduct in quitting your service so suddenly shows very little consideration for you. But there wasn't any other course open to me. Mrs. Montgomery made it plain to me that she expected me to take my departure immediately, but even if she hadn't done so I should have been forced to leave eventually. Because, you see, that damned detective was right—I *was* in gaol. And knowing that, it might have made it awkward for you in case your guests discovered you were harbouring what they'd call a criminal. Somehow I'm convinced you yourself would have accepted my assurance that I was innocent of the offence with which I was charged. Since I've been with you I've learnt that you judge your fellow-creatures for yourself and are not influenced by other people's opinions. You've given me new heart by showing that you trusted me. I'd begun to believe that there was no one in the world who had enough real goodness to trust a man who couldn't bring evidence to support his bare word. In fact, I didn't believe in any honesty, or justice, or kindness anywhere. You've changed all that. What I told you as to my family was true, and my name false—but you guessed that. My father lost both his small fortune and his life in 'stunt' flying, and my mother died while I was at Cambridge. The money that provided for us both came in the form of an allow-

ance—a very generous allowance—from her father, who is still alive and is a wealthy and highly respected pastoralist in this state. After I'd been sentenced to two years' imprisonment for an offence I never committed he refused to have anything further to do with me. I'd been 'out' for two months when you took me on. I was just about at the end of my tether then. It isn't easy for a gaol-bird to get any sort of a job, and I had no experience whatever of earning my own living. When I came to your house that morning I hadn't eaten anything for about thirty-six hours and I was pretty desperate. I'd been brooding over my wrongs, and I was determined to have satisfaction somehow, even if it meant a jump into the harbour afterwards. I wasn't quite sane, I think, at the time. You saved me. It wasn't only the job you gave me, but your unfailing kindness. I got to know you pretty well during the six weeks I was in your house, and you meant—and still mean—a hell of a lot to me. I can't ever thank you enough, but at least I'll tell you this. My life may have been messed up at the start, but I'll do my level best to make something of it yet. Somehow I feel I'd let you down if I didn't. I've got to keep faith with you. God bless you. Yours, M.D.

'Will you tell Peggy when next you see her all I've told you here. That will explain to her why I didn't write, as I think she expected me to do. Friendship for me wouldn't be likely to help her along in the world.'

"Any letters?" queried Mrs. Montgomery from the verandah.

Kathleen had been standing on the path in the sunshine as she read the closely written pages. "These for the house. I'll put them in the rack."

SING A SONG OF SYDNEY

"I thought I saw you reading something."

"Oh, I've got the usual delightful little packet of bills." Maurice's letter was for her eyes alone—or rather for hers and Peggy's. Kathleen held it folded within her palm as she passed over the bills to her mother.

CHAPTER VII

A GENTLEMAN by the name of Denning to see you, Sir," said the new clerk at the door of Moreton Roberts' private room.

The elderly solicitor frowned. "Haven't I told you before to ring through and find out if it's convenient for me to interview anyone instead of barging in like this?"

"I'm sorry, Sir. I forgot."

"I'm not paying you to forget my instructions. You're perfectly well aware that I don't see strangers without an appointment. What does this man want? Is he a client or a subscription hunter?"

"Oh, definitely a client, Sir. He told me it was important legal business."

"Very well, then. Show him in."

The clerk retired with alacrity, and a moment later announced, "Mr. Denning, Sir." And then hurriedly withdrew.

Roberts continued to scribble busily upon the writing-pad in front of him before looking up. This was his usual method of receiving callers, unless, indeed, he knew them to be either rich or important. When he did at last raise his head the young man had advanced to the other side of his table and stood facing him.

"Michael!" exclaimed the solicitor angrily. "Didn't I forbid you to enter this office again?"

"You did, dear cousin Moreton, and that is precisely

why I gave my name as Denning. Fortunately your obliging clerk out there wasn't aware of my identity—didn't recognize me as Michael Deering."

"I told you three months ago that I had nothing further to say to you."

"But I've quite a number of things to say to you."

"I've no wish to hear them."

"That's easily understandable. In the last few weeks I've been going over my own case—and your share in it—bit by bit. You needn't be alarmed. I'm not contemplating any violence. I'm calmer now than I was three months ago. But after some hard thinking I've arrived at certain conclusions which I should like to put to you."

"If you wish me to appeal again to your grandfather, it's useless. He's not likely to change his mind. In fact, only last week when I was up at Koolandra he emphasized the fact that he was done with you."

"Can you honestly swear that you yourself have never had any doubts as to my guilt?"

"I don't intend to discuss the matter further."

"You won't make another effort to trace the man and the girl who were on the verandah of the Korala that evening?"

Roberts laughed unpleasantly. "Why not endeavour to discover the identity of the young man who you say jumped into your car for a drunken lark and drove off with it?"

"Because, if he hadn't been afraid to take his gruel, he'd have come forward long ago. These others wouldn't have anything to lose by giving evidence."

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders. "That cock and bull story was told to the jury. It cut as much ice with them as it did with me."

"You professed to believe it when preparing my defence."

"A solicitor is bound to accept his client's statement however little he may be convinced by it himself."

"And yet it's true. I wasn't in my car when it killed Davis. I only came up with it when it was smashed and abandoned, and the dead man lying over his own steering wheel."

"The police found you with your car—which was head on to the other—on the wrong side of the road. You'd been drinking."

"I'd had a spot or two, I'll admit, but I was sober enough."

"I've no desire to hear all this again."

The young man had seated himself. He now gazed calmly into the solicitor's angry face. Those thin lips, half-hooded eyes, and prominent, aquiline nose, gave to the whole countenance a somewhat vulture-like appearance. Strange to reflect that this man was his own mother's cousin! Surely no two people were ever more unlike!

"Well, at least you'll have to listen to the conclusions I've arrived at," he remarked. "In the first place I'm convinced that you've always been my enemy."

"I think you were good enough to inform me of that during our last interview."

"I suspected it then. I'm sure of it now. I'm sure, also, that it wasn't only because my lack of application during my year in this office irritated you—what you termed my preposterous extravagance annoyed you. It went deeper than that. You were anxious to queer my pitch with my grandfather. To put my nose out of joint might put yours in, so to speak. You told me when I saw you last that my grandfather had not only decided

to discontinue my allowance, but had cut me out of his will. Who's he going to leave his money to? Not all to charity, surely? You as his nephew—you and your industrious son—will benefit to some degree by his disinheritance of me, won't you? You've drawn up his new will. I know what you were left in the old one. What do you get in this?"

"That is a question you may find answered on your grandfather's death. Perhaps you will accuse me next," Roberts' voice grew icily sarcastic, "of being responsible for your arrest and conviction."

"No, that was an unforeseen misfortune."

"Misfortune? Your own dissolute and intemperate ways were to blame for it."

"The Korala mayn't be a very reputable roadhouse, I'll admit, but if everyone who's ever visited it is to be branded as dissolute and intemperate, you'd include quite a number of this city's leading citizens—not to mention your own son."

"I'm not discussing my son. It wasn't he who killed Davis."

"And it wasn't I." Deering's tone was still quiet and even, but it was evident that he was exerting all his self-control to keep it so. "No," he went on, reverting to the solicitor's previous remark, "you weren't responsible for my arrest, but I've come to believe that you didn't grieve unduly when I got two years. And I believe, too, that you were to a great extent instrumental in inducing my grandfather to regard my way of life in the worst possible light, and to persuade him that I was lying when I declared myself innocent of the charge of manslaughter."

"Are there many more of these pleasant conclusions of yours to which you desire me to listen?"

"Yes. I don't believe that my grandfather is quite as hard as you represent him to be. It doesn't seem possible—unless his mind had been poisoned against me—that he'd leave me utterly unprovided for after my release from gaol."

"You saw his letter."

"But I know nothing of what you may have told him concerning me. I don't believe that you ever made any great effort to trace either the young fool who went off in my car or those two other witnesses who might have cleared me. And I *do* believe that it was you who persuaded my grandfather to leave me to face the world after serving my sentence with nothing but a few pounds in my pocket."

"You're talking as wildly and foolishly as you did on your release from gaol. What difference could it possibly make to me whether my uncle continued to pay you an allowance or left you penniless?"

"Penniless, I might go under completely—never have a chance of making good and winning back my grandfather's affection. That was what you hoped for."

"You credit me with all the Machiavellian arts." Roberts' smile was a sneer.

"Perhaps I'm mistaken. You can prove me so by doing your best to reopen the case."

Roberts laughed outright. This time with apparently genuine amusement. "If you'd inform me of how I might do that without a grain of evidence to support my application . . ."

"*Find* the evidence."

The solicitor's predatory face hardened. "I've no further time to waste in this futile discussion."

"You'll do nothing? Nothing to help me clear my name?"

"There's nothing to be done. You were convicted of manslaughter, and quite justly punished. And let me tell you this. If you don't take yourself off immediately I shall telephone to the police and have you removed."

Deering rose. "I wouldn't dream of troubling you to that extent. I'll go quite peaceably. I only wished to put my conclusions to the proof. Thanks very much, cousin Moreton. You've given me all the information I required. I know now what I've always suspected. You're just a common rogue." Without another word he walked to the door, opened it, and closed it quietly behind him.

Out in the street Michael Deering drew a deep breath. How he'd managed to control the impulse to drive his fist into that sneeringly sinister face he didn't quite know. But in spite of the fact that his whole body was shaking with anger, he had—at least while facing his enemy—contrived to dissemble his passion. That was something gained! If he were to achieve anything in the future—to keep his word to Mrs. Armitage and make something of his life—self-control was essential. He'd obtained the knowledge he had sought. Moreton Roberts, his mother's cousin and his grandfather's man of business, had never really wished him to be acquitted. The solicitor hadn't merely bungled the case as Michael at first believed; he'd very cleverly—while appearing to work on behalf of his client—done his level best to procure a conviction. Why, Michael wondered, hadn't he realized before the case came into court that with any other solicitor he would have stood a better chance of acquittal? Yet it had been in the natural course of events that the family solicitor, the man under whom young Deering was supposed to be pursuing his law studies, should prepare the case for the defence.

Roberts had at that time pretended to be certain of victory for his client. Had he made any strenuous endeavour to trace those missing witnesses? He'd talked a good deal of doing so, but what steps had actually been taken? Michael was in the dark as to this.

How could he himself proceed with enquiries? He had no difficulty in remembering the date. That was fixed for all time in his memory; but he was not in the least likely to recognize again the two people who were in the shadows of the verandah that night. The girl was fair, and the man older, and darker, that was all he remembered. To hope for any response to an advertisement for a fair woman and a dark man who visited the Korala roadhouse on a summer evening two and a half years previously was surely unduly optimistic.

Besides, these enquiries would cost money, and all he had in his possession now, since he had redeemed the few personal belongings which might be of value as a standby in the future, was a sum of something under five pounds.

He had tried to tell Kathleen Armitage in his letter to her what the six weeks spent under her roof, and in constant association with her, had meant to him. He hadn't expressed all he felt. It was difficult for him to put that into words. From the time he was convicted—and more especially on his release from gaol when, learning for the first time that his grandfather would do nothing whatever to help him, he had stormed and shouted abuse in his cousin's office—he had encouraged nothing but bitter thoughts of revenge in his heart. He'd make someone pay for the injustice that had been done to him! And he'd die rather than appeal again to that damned old man—rolling in money—who had cast him off in so heartless a fashion.

Although he had admitted to Kathleen that she had helped him, he wasn't sufficiently introspective to understand clearly what it was that she had done for him. She'd never preached at him; never endeavoured to force his confidence. And yet there was something about her—sincerity, kindness, humour, character, charm—what was it exactly? He'd always felt in her presence that here was a living exemplification of 'and the greatest of these is charity.' Well, whatever it was about her, she'd succeeded in producing in him some kind of change of heart. His bitterness wasn't by any means exorcised, nor was his desire for revenge. He'd like, above all things, to get even with that swine Roberts, for instance, but he realized now that his resolve to starve rather than appeal again to his grandfather arose far more from wounded egotism than from justifiable pride. He wouldn't humble himself to the old man for the sake of benefits to come, certainly, but he would make one effort at least to enlist the old man's help in clearing his name from an unjust accusation.

It was difficult not to regard himself with a certain amount of self-pity. He now recognized the fact that he had luxuriated in this feeling ever since his sentence. His wrongs had obsessed him. Yet wasn't he himself a good deal to blame for what had happened? Although he and his grandfather had never been greatly in sympathy with one another, he'd known of 'Old Sam's' ambition for him; knew that the old man cherished hopes that his grandson, after reading for the Bar, might enter upon a political career. Had he himself worked very hard to further the old man's schemes for his future? He'd thought of nothing much more than gaily spending the very generous allowance made to him. Looking back now, and trying to judge his own

conduct honestly and impartially, Michael couldn't accuse himself of more than a dislike for the law and for politics, and an easy acceptance of all forms of personal enjoyment. If he had any ambition at all it was to become a writer. At Cambridge, his flair for knocking off apt and amusing verses had earned for him some reputation as a coming Noel Coward or a Linklater. But what passed for wit amongst his fellow undergraduates was not a very firm foundation upon which to build hopes of future literary fame. And yet he had vaguely intended some day to try his hand at a novel or a play.

His lack of application in Roberts' office wasn't in itself altogether unnatural or unpardonable; but he could see that it must have angered 'Old Sam,' whose greatest desire was that his only grandson should make a name for himself in the service of his country.

Well, the idle apprentice had suffered indeed for his folly! Even the clearing of his name could never wipe out the memory of those two bitter years. Yet surely his grandfather—if he could see him and talk to him face to face—could be convinced that he had never been guilty of more than thoughtlessness and extravagance.

Deering was calmer now. His anger against Roberts—though by no means diminished—was pushed further from his conscious mind. He moved off along the pavement, crowded at this hour by home-going pedestrians, with his thoughts set resolutely on the future. Tonight he'd find a bed in the Salvation Army Shelter, and tomorrow he would set off on the long trek to Koolandra, his grandfather's station home. The few pounds in his possession were too precious to be wasted on railway fares. He'd 'hump his bluey.' Along the road over the mountains to the Western Plains he'd almost certainly get lifts from travelling motorists. He didn't imagine

he'd have to foot it for the full three hundred miles. But even the thought of that didn't daunt him. The short—ridiculously short—winter of this sunny land was practically over. Spring was in the air. In his swag he'd carry a notebook and pencil. Under the wide blue skies, with the larks singing high above him, he'd have ample opportunity to think: to allow those nebulous ideas of the novel he'd always wished to write form themselves into something more concrete than vague aspirations.

Who was the brave little Jap in one of Stevenson's essays who set out to see the unknown world with reams and reams of paper stuffed into his kimono—paper on which he might record his impressions of all the wonders awaiting him?

To his own amazement Michael realized that he was smiling, and that once more he was facing life with hope and courage.

CHAPTER VIII

BY eight o'clock next morning the sun had put to flight the early mist and gave promise of a day of genial brilliance.

Fortified by a good breakfast, Deering set out on his way. As he had decided to defer the purchase of the blankets and billy for his swag until the afternoon, when he hoped to reach Parramatta, he travelled without encumbrance save for a small knapsack slung over his shoulder. His plan was to seek work—any odd jobs that might be offered—as he went along, and for this reason he chose a route away from the industrial area and through the northern suburbs. A spot of lawn-mowing, or chopping firewood, might be easier to find, he decided, in the residential districts than any jobs on the more direct shop and factory-lined road.

As he made his way over the mile-long bridge the whole lovely panorama of the harbour and the city lay around him. The bright sunshine made glittering medallions on the blue water and lighted up every jutting promontory and curving bay. Smoke rose lazily from factories and wharves to the west, and the clang of shipwrights from the Government yards on Cockatoo Island could already be heard.

To his right, above the wool-stores of Circular Quay, the trees and grassy slopes gave one the impression of an English park—an impression lost immediately if one's eye travelled further to the small palm-planted enclosure at the extreme end of the wharves.

Beyond, point after point—some tree-fringed and

some crowned with massive, many-storied white or buff-coloured blocks of flats—stretched out into the azure of the harbour. Across the water—busy now with many craft—ferry-boats bearing early morning workers over to the city, tugs, colliers, and coastal steamers—he could see the grey stone walls and wide balconies of Admiralty House amongst the tall trees of its old garden; and below, the terraced paths leading down to the landing-stage—the stone steps awash in the crystal tide.

Past Fort Denison—the island known to the early convicts as Pinch Gut—moving smoothly and serenely, with just a line of sparkling foam where her bow cut the blue, came a big trans-Tasman liner making for her berth at Margaret Street. She would pass under the bridge directly below him. Deering stood to watch her go. He could see her passengers crowding her deck-rail, her brass-work flashing in the sun, her white paint gleaming.

One hundred and fifty years since Governor Phillip and his convoy of wretched convict ships sailed up to Sydney Cove to drop their anchors before a scrub and forest-covered unknown shore.

What would Phillip think today of this great and beautiful city which had its beginning in his first small settlement?

The thought of those wretched souls brought back a more personal memory. But, after all, what were his sufferings in comparison with theirs? A mere nothing. Many of them had been as unjustly sentenced as he, and the penalty endured even by those guilty was out of all proportion to their crimes.

With a shrug of his shoulders Deering walked on. Though he intended to do his level best to prove his punishment unmerited, his wrongs belonged to the past.

To dwell upon them was a wasteful spending of power. Self-pity merely meant enervation of the will.

After some hours, during which time he had called at over a score of likely looking houses without success in obtaining work, his eyes had grown a trifle harder. Not altogether pleasant to have doors slammed in one's face, and though in some cases he was offered sixpence or a shilling, he could not honestly say that any of the maids or housewives he interviewed evinced much pleasure when he explained his errand.

Well, their attitude, though galling to his pride, was understandable enough. Through the years of the depression they must have been wearied to death by men who made the request for odd jobs merely an excuse for begging.

The money offered him he refused. Unless he could earn it he was resolved to accept nothing.

At last, when hunger and thirst were sorely tempting him to expend one of his precious shillings in their assuagement, he came upon a cottage where in the garden stood a little old woman perched precariously on two boxes endeavouring to clip the tangled creeper from her verandah. He opened the shabby gate and walked in.

"Do you want any help with that?" he asked. "I'd be glad to do it for you."

She looked down at him over the spectacles which had slipped forward upon her nose. Her wrinkled face was flushed, and her hair hung in thin grey wisps over her damp forehead. "I don't doubt it, young feller," she said. "And charge me a couple o' bob. Well, let me tell yer I don't pay nothing to nobody for doing what I'm quite able to do meself." With that she turned fiercely to her task once more, but the sudden movement

overbalanced the upper box, and had Deering not stepped forward and neatly fielded her, she would have crashed to the ground. As it was, he deposited her quite safely upright upon her own two feet.

"Now see what you nearly done! You and your interfering," she fumed. "You might have broke me neck."

Michael laughed. "I'm sorry," he said. "But really, you know, I could manage that job better than you can. I'm so much taller. And I don't want any payment—though I'll admit I *should* like a cup of tea."

"It's in the gutters," remarked the old woman.

"What? Oh yes, I see—the creeper. And you want it removed."

She pushed back her spectacles and gazed vaguely upwards. "Every time it rains—not but what we've had next to no rain for weeks—it leaks all over the place. I don't want it to grow no more. It's pushing the spouting all out of plumb. And it makes my front rooms dark, what's more, and likely to be darker if I let it rampage all over the shop this spring."

"I'll soon settle its rampaging. Give me the clippers."

"Shears I call 'em."

"Shears then."

She handed them to him without further protest, and Michael, after making the boxes thoroughly secure, mounted and was soon at work clearing off the clinging vines.

The little old woman stood watching him in silence for a few moments. "Ain't you got no work?" she asked at last.

"No. I'm looking for some."

"You won't get none here. Not paid work."

"I told you I didn't expect payment. How's that?"

Under his strong hands the vine was coming down in masses. "Not so rampageous as it was, eh?"

"I could of done it meself if you hadn't of knocked me off the box."

"Yes, but it's a hot day, isn't it? As hot almost as an English summer."

"You come from the old country?"

"Yes, but I'm really Australian. I was born out here."

"Same's me. Never been out of it and don't want to. Australia'll do me. There ain't no country as good as this anywheres, so they say."

"Who says?" queried Michael.

"Everybody. God's own country. That's what it's called. Ain't you never heard that?"

"Perhaps if you saw other countries . . ."

"Pooh!" said the old woman. "What's the use of seeing other countries if your own's the best? Look at our bridge. There ain't another like it in the world."

Michael wisely refrained from further argument and the old woman went on: "I'll get you that cup o' tea. Don't you go off with them shears while I'm gone."

"I'd rather have the tea than the shears. How far do you want this cut? To the top of the verandah poles?"

"Yes, that'll be O.K." She departed towards the rear of the cottage, but returned very shortly to see how the work was progressing. Evidently it was being done to her satisfaction, for in silence she retired again. After another fifteen minutes hard clipping the job was finished. The green mass of clinging tendrils lay wilting on the grass. Michael was gathering the mass into his arms when the old woman returned. "Where shall I throw all this?"

"Back of the house. I'll show you." She picked up

her shears. "Bring them boxes round here and I'll give you your tea."

At the kitchen door, seated on one of the boxes, Michael drank two cups of hot tea and finished up the thick slice of bread and butter provided. "Like another piece?" asked the old woman.

"If you can spare it."

"I'll spare it, but the job ain't really worth two slices. And let me tell you, young man, you needn't think I got money in the house. You can't come back and rob me of nothing. And what's more, I got a fierce dog here at nights. A Nalsatian."

"I won't come back. I'm on my way to the country."

"What part?"

"Over the mountains to the Western Plains."

"That's a long way."

"It is."

"I s'pose you ain't had no dinner."

"No, but this is good."

She went back into her kitchen and returned with a third slice of bread and butter upon which she had placed a piece of cheese. "You can eat that on the road," she said.

"Thanks very much, I'll eat it now," returned Michael. But he knew that the old woman was anxious for him to be gone. She walked with him to the front gate, and then as he said good-bye and moved off she called out, rather surprisingly: "You can have another cup o' tea if you're coming back this way later on. But, mind you, I don't give tea to every tramp that asks for it."

"Then I was in luck," called Michael in reply. "Don't let the creeper rampage again. Good-bye."

From the ridge where he now walked he could see

Parramatta spread out below him, the gleam of water from the river, and far away against the sky the line of the Blue Mountains.

For twenty-five years after Phillip's arrival with his unhappy band of convicts this stark mountain chain had proved an insurmountable barrier, shutting the colonists into the strip of land along the coast. Michael's thoughts turned to those intrepid three, Blaxland, Lawson, and Wentworth—Wentworth only nineteen years of age—who first blazed a practicable track over the pass leading to the rich pastoral plains beyond.

Deering's reverie was suddenly and rudely disturbed by a clatter of hoofs on the tarred road and a yell of, "Whoa there!" A horse, harnessed to a fruiterer's cart, was coming towards him at a quick trot; a man, evidently the owner, came in hot pursuit.

Michael was able to grab the reins and pull the horse to a standstill.

"Thanks, mate." The man was breathing hard as he came up, but not too short of breath to be speechless. He swore with great vigour and fluency at his errant steed. "He's new," he explained. "I oughta brought a boy with me to hold him. That's the second time he's had me on the run today. I put the chain on the wheel, but he don't seem to take no notice of that. And I got half a dozen more calls to pay yet."

"Shall I come with you and sit in the cart?"

The man looked at him in surprise. "Have you got time? Where are you heading for?"

"Over there." Michael waved towards the blue line against the sky. "But an hour or two on a long tramp won't make much difference."

"Swagging it?" The fruiterer's tone expressed a certain amount of astonishment. It was obvious that the

young man's appearance did not suggest a sundowner.

Michael nodded. "And looking for jobs on the way."

"Well, if a bob's any good to you, I'd be glad to have you."

Michael climbed up into the cart and they drove off. The fruiterer's round did not advance him on his journey, but after an hour he was set down with the earned shilling in his pocket and a few oranges in his knapsack. Then as his fruiterer friend drove off with a "So long, mate. Good luck," Michael continued on his way.

Half-an-hour's walking brought him on to one of the main roads leading to the mountains. Cars and lorries passed him at frequent intervals, but no one offered him a lift. He had not expected one until reaching the lonelier stretches of the road West, and was therefore somewhat surprised when a woman driving a utility truck pulled up beside him. "Going far?" she asked.

"A few hundred miles out West."

She laughed. She had a pleasant face, browned with the sun, and wore shabby but well-cut serviceable clothes. Her age might have been anything in the late thirties or early forties. "I'm afraid I can't take you as far as that, but I can give you a lift for another twenty-five miles or so."

"Thanks. That would be grand." He swung up into the car beside her, deciding that it wasn't necessary to stop in Parramatta. Any country store could supply him with blankets for his swag.

"You're not an Aussie, are you?" remarked the woman as they set off.

"Why do you say that?"

"You speak like an Englishman. Not with an awful Australian twang."

Deering laughed. "From that I gather you're English yourself."

She nodded. But Michael hadn't needed this gesture of affirmation. He had placed her at once. The young mothers and elder sisters of his friends at Cambridge were of this type. Only an Englishwoman—quite sure of her own position—had this entire freedom from self-consciousness, this 'take it or leave it' air, which was not by any means arrogance or assertiveness, but some quality of heredity and upbringing. "You haven't guessed right as far as I'm concerned," he went on. "I'm a dinkum Aussie. Was born here and didn't leave the country until I was ten years old."

"But then you went to England. Public school?"

"Yes. Rugby."

"Then why the devil did you ever come back?"

Again Michael laughed. "You don't seem in love with my native land."

"I loathe it. Look at this." With a jerk of her head she indicated the country round about them. "Dried up, desolate-looking grass, the everlasting rattling, shadeless, grey-green gum trees. All arid and monotonous. It's like asking for bread and being given a stone here. Hard. Everything's hard. And then think of the softness, the gentle beauty of the English countryside. The little cottages in their gardens. Bluebells and primroses in the woods in spring. And all the delicate variations of colour as the elms and oaks and beeches come into leaf. And the lovely old market-towns, the . . ."

"The Black Country with its millions of workers who never see anything more beautiful than endless miles of mean, squalid little streets."

"Oh those!" She shrugged her shoulders. "Those aren't what I mean by England."

"And neither is the hard, dry grass and the everlasting gum Australia. Not that I find the gums monotonous. Look over there! Isn't there great beauty in those smooth silver-white boles rising high and straight? Something austere and pure? And the wattles! Massed gold against the sky."

"And all these little weatherboard shanties with their iron roofs dumped down in the bare paddocks are lovely too, I suppose?"

"You can't blame the landscape for those."

"They're an indication of the taste—or lack of it—of the inhabitants."

"And who's to blame for England's slums?"

Suddenly she flashed a smile at him. Her teeth very white in her brown face. "You sound as if you really liked this damn country."

"I was born here, and our earliest memories are always our most vivid and most cherished, I believe. I love the hard bright sunshine, the blue of those mountains ahead of us. And you're unfair to our spring. Think of the myriad of flowers we have about us even now. In a week or two the Bush will be full of them."

"Paper flowers. As cheerless as the ones some awful people buy at Woolworths to decorate their fireplaces. Not that many people here possess fireplaces. They're an unknown quantity to most of the inhabitants of this God-forsaken land. We warm ourselves by a dreary little oil heater. No, you're merely talking for the sake of argument when you deny that this is a hard, dry, untidy and unhomelike land."

"Not at all. I speak as I find it. No English dawn could give me the thrill I used to experience as a child waking to the clearness of a hot spring morning—knowing that long hours of sunshine were ahead of me when

I should be down at the shearing shed, or riding out mustering with one of the station hands through the Bush with the birds singing——”

“Birds singing?” she interrupted. “Kookooburras cackling and exploding with satiric mirth. I always think their raucous and infernal din has a personal note. The laughing jackass jeers at the fools who colonized his native land.”

“I’ve an affection for the old jack, but he’s not our only bird. I heard larks singing this morning.”

“They’re not native to this country, I’ll swear, and you won’t hear them in the Bush.”

“But think of what you *see*! All the exquisite blues and greens of the love-birds as they flash past in the sun. And the galahs. I remember once as a child coming upon an old grey gum stump literally massed with those birds. They looked like a wealth of great soft pink and grey blossoms. Most lovely.”

“Occasionally, of course, one gets a glimpse of a queer exotic beauty,” she admitted, “but on the whole the countryside is drab and uninteresting.”

“There’s no gentle serenity here, I grant you, but England can’t give you the sense of space and freedom we enjoy. And as for cities, where can you find anything much lovelier than Sydney?”

“Oh, Sydney!” Again she shrugged. “I’m tired of ‘our harbour,’ ‘our bridge,’ and ‘our Bradman.’ I’m not discussing cities. I’m asking if you can seriously compare the gentle loveliness of England with—this.”

“I don’t compare. That’s where you make your great mistake. Each has a different value. But it’s no good arguing over it. Perhaps in time you’ll learn to appreciate the real beauty of my country.”

“In time? We’ve had three years of it.”

"Well, then—as you asked me—I'll give your question back to you. Why did *you* come to this damned country, as you call it?"

"Partly for my husband's health, and partly because we were told we could make good money poultry farming. Good money! My God! I've never worked so hard for so little result in my life as I've done here."

The truck sped on and they continued to talk. She was nothing if not frank. Her husband's name was Guy Tresscott. For the past week he hadn't been at all well, and she had been dependent upon the help of an inexperienced youth, the son of a neighbouring farmer. This help, however, was by way of being intermittent. The lad came only when it suited him. "Young Australia—or old Australia, for the matter of that—thinks nothing of letting you down at any time," remarked Mrs. Tresscott bitterly. "They don't regard any promise as binding. It's their method of asserting their independence." With nearly a thousand fowls to care for, and the spring chicks hatching out in the incubators, she wasn't looking forward much to the next week or two. Today she'd been into the city with day-old chicks, and was returning with shell-grit, grain, pollard and bran. The Tresscotts always bought for themselves at the Sussex Street stores—cheaper and saved the cartage. She was anxious to get home well before sunset as she wished to prevent her husband from attempting any of the evening feeding.

It occurred to Michael that under the circumstances she might be glad of his help for a few days, but he felt somewhat diffident about offering his services; she'd been good enough to help him on his way, and after her frank acceptance of him he feared that she might

think he was taking advantage of her kindness by endeavouring to obtain a job.

There must be something in telepathy he reflected a moment later when she suddenly remarked: "If you're footing it for some hundreds of miles I take it you're not one of the idle rich. Or perhaps you are, and doing it for a lark?"

"Sheer necessity," returned Michael.

"In that case, how would you like to put in a week with us? We can't afford more than about twenty-five bob and your keep, but we've a decent little spare room. Don't accept merely to help me out of a hole. I'll quite understand if you want to get on."

"A week's delay on my journey won't trouble me, and as I don't possess as much as a fiver at present the twenty-five bob will be exceedingly welcome. Thanks very much for giving me the chance to earn it. But I'm afraid I don't know much about the work. I used to have my own chickens when I was a kid, but my poultry farming could hardly be described as scientific."

"That's all right." Again she turned her pleasant smile upon him. "I can show you the ropes. At present, in addition to the ordinary routine work, feeding, watering and culling, it's keeping the incubators and foster-mothers at the right temperature. We haven't electricity, worse luck, and have to rely on oil lamps. They need a lot of attention. You'll be a godsend to me, and poor old Guy will be thankful to have someone of his own kind to talk to in the evenings."

So that was settled. They drove on, talking meanwhile of many things; and as the afternoon shadows began to lengthen, having left the highway and proceeded for some miles along a side road, they turned into a paddock, where, on rising ground, amongst a few

trees, a weatherboard bungalow could be descried. This, though small, was very attractive looking: white painted, green-shuttered, and verandahed. Certainly a great contrast to the box-like erections which Mrs. Tresscott had so scornfully referred to as 'shanties.' Behind the bungalow were a score of fowl-houses, together with some larger sheds; while against the green of the grassed slopes the wandering leghorns showed up like drifted snow.

Mrs. Tresscott honked her horn as they drove up to the garden gate, and at the sound a man emerged from the house and came down the narrow path set between rows of flaming marigolds. He was tall and walked with a slight stoop. His lean, clean-shaven face certainly showed signs of ill-health, but he greeted his wife with a cheery smile. "You're earlier than I expected."

"I wanted to get home in case that oaf didn't turn up. Even if he's here he can't be left to himself. He has a cheerful little way of overfeeding half the birds and starving the rest. Oh, by the way," she went on casually, "this is Michael Deering, and he's promised to stay with us for a week and give us a hand with the work."

The tall, gaunt man grinned as he nodded to Michael. "Did she pick you up on the road? That's a habit of hers if she happens to pass anyone whose appearance attracts her. I always look forward to her return from town, wondering who and what our new visitor will be."

"You needn't give me away. Michael will soon discover my little idiosyncrasies for himself. Have you had tea?"

"No, I waited."

"Well, we'll just get this stuff into the food-shed and then we'll be in for it." Mrs. Tresscott was busily engaged in handing various packages and parcels to her

husband. "Mind that bottle—oysters. And there's your tobacco." She stepped back into the car, and she and Michael drove off towards the little garage. A small lean-to attached to the building was equipped with bins, and into these Michael tipped the contents of the many sacks which he unloaded from the back of the truck. As he did so Mrs. Tresscott pointed out to him the portable boiler which must be lighted for heating the early morning bran and pollard; instructed him in the routine of the day's work. "We'll have a cup of tea before we give the birds their evening grain. Guy's sure to have seen to the lamps in the incubators and brooders."

Michael realized as he glanced about the different sheds and listened to Mrs. Tresscott's quick explanatory remarks that she was a thoroughly efficient worker. Everything was in apple-pie order. It was the same within the little bungalow. She had no regular help in the house and yet the place was comfortable, home-like, and obviously well-cared for. The pieces of old mahogany were well polished, the crested silver teaspoons shone. He had been right in 'placing' his new-found friend. The few photographs in the room were those of members of what is sometimes referred to as the 'privileged' class. Men in uniform, a woman in presentation dress, a group of well-fed, well-dressed people on the steps of an impressive looking country-house. No wonder the exile was inclined to rebel against the rougher and less cultured conditions of this new land.

Deering's week with Guy and Hermione Tresscott lengthened into two. By the end of the fortnight Tresscott himself had recovered sufficiently to resume the duties which his wife had insisted upon his abandoning during his indisposition.

It was a happy interlude for Michael. He enjoyed the work—which, if constant, was by no means arduous—but he enjoyed much more his nightly arguments and discussions with his temporary employers. They appeared to be utterly incurious as to the circumstances which had led to his present financial embarrassment; nor did they seem to have the least wish to discover for what reason, and to what destination, he was ‘swagging’ it. They accepted him as casually as if he had arrived armed with letters of introduction, and Michael felt himself under no obligation to reveal his past history.

They talked quite frankly of themselves and their affairs, however, and at the end of his time with them he felt a really genuine attachment to them both. Their conversation, often embellished with adjectives which Michael as a small boy had been taught were only used by bullock drivers or bush-whackers, never failed to amuse him.

Tresscott was by no means as biassed against Australia as his wife. It was necessary for them to scratch for a crust somewhere, he said, and why not do their scratching in a land of sunshine instead of under grey winter skies, with nothing but a short and uncertain summer to look forward to.

“Give me an uncertain summer every time instead of this pitiless glare day after day,” replied his wife.

“She talks like this,” said Tresscott to Michael, “but she used to curse the English climate as heartily as anyone, and she refuses to go back.”

For all his admiration of Hermione Tresscott—and he knew her to be both attractive and capable—Michael could not help contrasting her at times with Kathleen Armitage. Kathleen and she must be about

the same age, but Kathleen, had she been transplanted to new and uncongenial surroundings for the sake of a loved one's health, would never have betrayed a hint of her own discomfort. Apparently Hermione Tresscott, though devoted to her husband, could not see that her tirades against this new land often wounded him, and brought home to him the fact that it was partly for his sake that they were here. Michael wondered a little at her obtuseness in this direction. Couldn't she see, when she was being particularly witty at the expense of someone or something Australian, that the thought in her husband's mind was, 'It's because of me she's forced to live in a land she hates.' If such an idea even occurred to her she would be overwhelmed with contrition; but Guy Tresscott took care to conceal this slight feeling of culpability. He laughed at her malicious sallies, and apparently she believed that he shared her opinions, and was merely amused by her remarks. Kathleen wouldn't air her own grievances. She wouldn't allow them to possess her. She'd see the best side of her adopted country—find something about it to love and to admire.

Michael, somewhat to his own astonishment, was suddenly aware that a great deal of his waking thoughts were taken up with Kathleen Armitage—yes, and some of his dreams too! Good heavens! She was at least fifteen years older than he was. He couldn't possibly. . . No, of course he couldn't. Yet he'd like to write to her and tell her of this fortnight spent with the Tresscotts, and he could give her the address of some post office further along his route to which she might reply. Would she feel there was any necessity to answer his letter?

He was thinking of this when he had left the poultry farm behind him, and was driving with Hermione Tresscott in the truck to a point where their side road

joined the main highway to the mountains. Both she and her husband had made little of this trouble in putting him thus on his way. "It won't take me more than half an hour," said Mrs. Tresscott. "And it will be a help to you. You wouldn't be so likely to get a lift on this by-road. And remember," she added as she bade him good-bye, "you can have a job with us again in a few weeks' time when we're culling out the grillers, if you care to take it. Just let us know. You're a damn good worker even if you are an Australian."

"Ah," said Michael slyly, "that must be due to the years I spent in England. But thanks most awfully for everything. If I'm returning this way I'll certainly hope to call in and see you. You've both been frightfully decent to me, and I may be very glad of the job once more." He took off his hat and waved to her as she drove off.

Yes, there could be no harm whatever in writing to Mrs. Armitage, he decided. She was far too generous hearted to consider it cheek on his part, though of course he couldn't count on receiving any letter from her in reply. There would be no reason—beyond the kindly interest she had shown in him—for her to bother her head about him further.

Yet he'd write—and hope for the best.

CHAPTER IX

FOR the first few weeks of the *Southern Belles* tour the company had played in some of the larger inland towns. But the centres in which any kind of a theatre was to be found were few and far between. Picture houses abounded, but for years past the hazards of a stage production had been fought shy of by theatrical entrepreneurs. Many of the young people throughout the country had never seen flesh and blood players. Nor did they evince an overwhelming desire to do so—at any rate as far as this revue, advertised as ‘A Fiesta of Fun and Frolic’ was concerned.

As the more important towns were left behind, and the members of the company found themselves billed to appear in Masonic Halls in outlying districts, a distinct lessening of the high spirits in which the troupers had set forth from the city was noticeable.

Most of the chorus girls had, like Peggy, been ‘out’ for some considerable time before securing this engagement. They had been led to believe that the tour was merely a short trial run preparatory to opening at the old Prince of Wales theatre in town. In addition to the hard travelling, rehearsals were called continually for ‘cuts,’ new numbers, and alterations to the script.

“It’s a lousy show, that’s what it is,” one night remarked a girl who occupied the place next to Peggy at the trestle table where sticks of grease-paint, candle ends, eye-black, and jars of face-cream lay in tumbled confusion. “We’ve a fat chance of ever reaching Sydney with it.”

The girls were all busily making up. Twenty of them crowded into one small room.

"You thought it was a sure hit when we rehearsed," remarked another girl.

"I've changed my mind since then. We'll be lucky if we don't have to hoof it home—that's what I say! Blane told me today he believed they were going to ask us to take half salaries after this week."

"They can't do that!" exclaimed Peggy. "We've got our contract. The Federation would see we weren't done out of our money."

"Oh, don't be such a damn fool! What can the Federation do if there isn't any money?"

"What's the house like tonight?" asked someone else.

"Just about as bloody as usual, I expect."

Further discussion followed, but Peggy took very little part in it. For the past two or three weeks she had been increasingly despondent. She felt sure now that the revue was doomed to failure; but it wasn't only the prospect of unemployment that depressed her—bad as that would be—it was something else. Ever since she had had that letter from Kathleen, enclosing the one from Maurice, she'd been conscious of a dull little ache in her heart. He hadn't been even sufficiently interested in her to send her one short line. Not, of course, that it mattered. They'd only been friends, and yet . . .

"Overture and beginners!" called a raucous voice at the door.

Immediately there was a scurry and fluster among the girls, and the sound of protests. "It isn't ten-to yet."

"Give us a dab of your rouge, Di!"

"Anyone seen my shoes?"

"Hell! My stocking's laddered!"

But in a few minutes most of the girls were trooping

down the narrow stairs towards the stage. The strains of the orchestra reached them as they descended. A nasty echoing sound the music had, reflected Peggy gloomily. The hall couldn't be half full. Oh, well, she'd saved a few pounds and paid off a little of her debt to 'Avalon.' She could go back there when they disbanded, and one job often led to another. She might get something soon, and she wouldn't think of Maurice any more. No, never again. If he'd cared *at all* he'd have written to her as well as to Kathleen.

From the first this had not been a very happy tour for Peggy. These girls with whom she was working were of a different class to those who came from Nancy Dymock's studio. Nancy gave her pupils more than tuition in dancing. She let them know the dangers and temptations of the career upon which they were embarking, and succeeded in providing her students with a valuable background of self-respect and sound common-sense. Most of the chorus and ballet in *Southern Belles* had neither one nor the other; and Peggy knew she wasn't very popular with the majority of them. They let her understand that they regarded her as prudish and stuck-up—though they worded their opinions in much more forcible language; and because she lived as quietly and cheaply as possible, and neither drank nor took part in any of the rowdy parties with callow youths in the various towns they visited, they affected to believe her mean as well.

When the curtain rose Peggy realized that the ominously echoing sound of the overture had indeed been a melancholy portent of the emptiness of the hall. This was certainly by far the worst house to which they had yet played. Less than two hundred people occupied the cheaper seats, and a mere handful were in the higher

priced stalls. Amongst these was one man upon whom, after the opening chorus, most of the girls' eyes were riveted, for rumour, spreading quickly at a few words from Blane, had it that he was one of the management from Sydney—very influential in the theatrical world—very rich. Loud were the lamentations that he should have arrived at such an inopportune time—to see the poorest audience to which they had ever opened.

Nevertheless, almost every girl was determined to do her level best tonight, to attract, if possible, the important personage's attention to herself, so that even if this show should fail, his interest might benefit her in the future.

Peggy did no more than glance at him. She saw that he was good-looking, dark, fortyish. She did not share the illusions of her fellow choristers as to the chance of being picked out by him and offered a good part in some new production. These things simply didn't happen. The principals were the only ones who were likely to engage his attention. One of the other girls might 'get off' with him. Be asked out to supper. That was a different matter and one that concerned her not at all.

Thus, having dismissed the important stranger from her mind, she was all the more surprised when, seeing him with Joe Williams on the stage before the beginning of the second act, she found herself beckoned forward by the stage-manager. "Peggy, Mr. Craig has a message for you from a friend in Sydney."

Williams moved off and left them together, and Peggy, aware of the curious and somewhat inimical glances of the girls around her, knew that she had coloured under her make-up. At his first words, however, her embarrassment fled, and she flashed her sweet,

bright smile at him. This was Mrs. Armitage's friend—Peter Craig. Peggy had heard her speak of him on more than one occasion, and it appeared that Kathleen had bidden him introduce himself should he by any chance be present at one of their performances.

The girls, looking back over their shoulders at the two talking in the wings, were grouping themselves upon the stage. Peggy must join them.

"I'll see you after the show," said Craig. "Come and nibble a sandwich with me at my hotel."

"I'd love to!" said Peggy.

So she herself was to be 'taken out to supper!' But this phrase had a different meaning under the present circumstances to the one she had attached to it previously in thinking that one of the girls might 'get off' with him.

Nevertheless, the invitation and her acceptance having been overheard by a member of the chorus, her room-mates put their own construction upon it. While taking off their stage costumes, and wielding their grease-towels to remove their make-up, Peggy had to put up with a good deal of sarcastic chaff. Not all of it was ill-natured. "Put in a word for me, Peg." "Find out whether the show's opening in Sydney." "Tell him it isn't fair to ask us to take half salaries." But these more friendly remarks were more than counter-balanced by observations concerning dark horses, and the damn cheek of people turning up their noses at others when they were just the same themselves, only a bit more sly.

Peggy slipped into her plain little coat and skirt as speedily as possible, and, running down the stairs, found Craig, with Williams still in attendance, waiting for her at the stage-door. Craig's hotel was near at hand, and as they walked together along the verandahed pavement

of the wide main street Peggy chattered away with complete freedom to her new-found friend. He wasn't able to tell her much news of Mrs. Armitage beyond the fact that he had met her in town a few weeks previously, but he was able to reply more fully to Peggy's eager questions regarding his presence here. He wasn't in any way connected with the management of *Southern Belles*. Nor was he, as the girls imagined, very influential in the theatrical world. He was a friend of Dantry's, and on one or two occasions in the past had been associated in a small way with the backing of certain theatrical ventures. As far as this revue was concerned he'd been asked to put money into the production, and now, while on his way to the West, where shearing on some of the big sheep stations was in progress, he had made a slight detour to see the show for himself and decide whether it were worth a gamble.

"And is it?" asked Peggy.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Not to me, at any rate."

"It was an awful house tonight. The worst we've had. It's terribly hard to play to a bad audience," said Peggy, endeavouring to excuse the performance.

"One can make allowances for that. But why *was* it an awful house? This isn't such a small town, and it's the centre of a big wheat-growing district. No, my child, I'm sorry, but I don't see the makings of any kind of success in the show. All the same, I can quite truthfully say that even if Kathleen hadn't asked me to look out for you, I'd have picked you as far and away the best dancer on the stage tonight.

"Oo—er! How nice!" said Peggy. "But what about Bright and Happy? They're really frightfully clever dancers."

"I wasn't thinking of the men, and theirs is acrobatic slapstick stuff."

"I can do that too," said Peggy quickly.

Craig laughed. "I've no doubt you can, but I prefer you without a red nose. Here we are. I believe your friends, Mr. Bright and Mr. Happy, are staying at this pub as well as your platinum blonde leading lady and her spouse. What part does he play?"

"He's composed most of the music and is musical director. I expect you've seen her before in town, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I don't know that I particularly want to see her again. I've never been able to understand why she's starred in any show."

"Crowds of people think she's marvellous. As a matter of fact, she's been kicking up a most frightful row at being brought out to the country. It's only her husband who's making her stay on. She's scared stiff of him."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but he's a terribly jealous, queer sort of person."

"He need fear no competition from me," returned Craig easily.

They had reached the hotel, and Craig ushered her into the lounge, which was furnished in the approved modern hotel style, with brown leather chairs and settees, palms in brass jars, a marbled carpet, and many glass-topped round tables. "What's it to be? Whisky and soda with the sandwiches?" asked Craig.

Peggy made a little grimace. "I suppose you'll think I'm a horrid little wowser if I have tea?"

He smiled. "Why should I?"

Peggy looked relieved as she answered his smile. "The girls call me—no, perhaps I'd better not tell you what

they call me—because I don't drink. You see, it isn't only that I'm not very fond of whisky, though I'll admit I like wine and cocktails and things occasionally, but if you once start ordering drinks in a dressing-room it costs such a *frightful* lot. And there's a debt I'm trying to pay off."

"This isn't the dressing-room, and you can have wine and cocktails and things—I don't quite know what 'things' are—here without increasing your financial liability."

"I'd rather have tea."

"Tea you shall have, then." His clear hazel eyes smiled at her. "But don't ask me to join you in it. I prefer whisky."

He gave the order to the white-coated waiter, and they settled down in two chairs beside one of the tables.

A nice little kid, Craig decided. Far too good to be knocking round with this shoddy crowd. He found her natural, unselfconscious manner, and her quick, flashing smile most attractive. He liked her, too, for her genuine gratitude to Kathleen. For Peggy was telling him quite frankly of all she owed—both in money and in affection—to 'darling Mrs. Armitage.'

The two battered-looking actors, billed as 'Bright and Happy,' had now entered the lounge, and shortly afterwards the platinum blonde, Cora Lascelles, and her husband appeared. They were all four talking and drinking at a neighbouring table. Bright and Happy had thrown a "Hello, Peg!" in the direction of Craig's companion as they passed, but the platinum blonde gave no sign of recognition.

Suddenly, however, the leading lady got up from her chair and advanced towards them. "It is Mr. Craig, isn't it?" she enquired vivaciously.

Craig rose, and she, still ignoring Peggy, continued in a gushing tone: "I believe I met you once with George Dantry. I *never* forget a face. You were in front to-night, weren't you? Isn't it *too* pitiful to bring this good little show to a one-horse town like this? I hope you will tell them when you get back to Sydney that it's simply suicidal to keep us out in the country in this way. The sooner we open in town the better. You *do* agree with me, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about theatrical matters."

"But you're interested in this production, aren't you?"

Craig, who had remained standing, would have been pleased to reply, 'I can't imagine anyone being interested in it.' She'd never met him with Dantry, he knew. That was merely an excuse to introduce herself and, if possible, to find out what prospects there were of *Southern Belles* eventually being produced in town. "I was interested in seeing the show tonight. But that was because I had been asked by a friend to look up Miss Vincent. You do know each other, of course?"

"Oh, yes," Miss Cora Lascelles nodded somewhat haughtily in Peggy's direction. "But aren't you," she turned again effusively to Craig, "one of the syndicate who were responsible for producing the Revue?"

"I have nothing whatever to do with it. I'm a wool-buyer. Not a theatrical magnate. And I'm on my way now to some of the sheds further West. I'm afraid I haven't the least idea what the management's plans are. You'd better write to Dantry and find out what you can from him."

"I see." She was not by any means convinced, but she had enough sense to realize that she could do nothing more to pump the man standing politely before her.

"Well, come round and see me when the Revue opens in Sydney, won't you? I always throw a party after a first night. You will, won't you?"

"Thanks very much."

She nodded, and returned to her own table, and Craig reseated himself.

Peggy regarded him with twinkling eyes. "You thought that was a safe enough promise. I could see you saying to yourself, 'You'll throw no party after the first night of *Southern Belle*, my girl, because there ain't going to be no first night.'"

Craig laughed. "You're evidently a thought reader."

"She may rake you into some other party."

"Not if I know it."

"Well, I must go." She rose. "Thanks so much for the tea and sandwiches."

"Where are you staying?"

"At an awful little pub at the other end of the town. Oh, it's not so bad really. Quite clean, but not like 'Avalon.'"

"How far is it?"

"Not more than half a mile."

"I'll get my car out."

"Goodness, no! I can easily walk."

"And more easily drive. You stay here for a moment, and I'll bring the car round to the front."

As soon as she was alone Bright and Happy strolled over in her direction. They were the only two of the principals who had recognized her existence in the company, for they had once practised a dance together which Williams thought might be introduced into the show. Like other numbers tentatively proposed and then abandoned, the idea of this triangular dance had come to nothing.

"Making your marble good with the management, Peg?" said Happy.

"He hasn't anything to do with the management. And he's just a friend of a friend of mine."

"Sez you," remarked Bright meaningly. "Well, put in a word for your pals, sister." The two men moved on.

It wasn't necessary to be a thought reader to know what *they* were thinking, reflected Peggy. She didn't actually resent their inference. She was too well used to stage life for that. No one believed you were straight, or if they did, they considered you a fool. And Bright and Happy were really quite good sorts in spite of the fact that their minds seemed to be entirely concentrated on women, drink, and suspicions of all other comedians who might steal their gags or imitate the dances they had arranged for themselves.

Peggy adored her work and loved the stage, yet often the atmosphere—especially in a company of this sort—depressed her. With the exception of one or two of the girls, and Blane, and Joe Williams—she hadn't an idea in common with any of them. Oh, well, all companies weren't the same.

It was a funny thing, though, now she came to think of it, reflected Peggy, where in the world would you meet on the stage a man like Craig? Men such as he seemed to be of an entirely different race to actors—to all actors she'd come across, anyhow. The stage often improved women, she thought, but not men. It seemed to make them more vain and petty. Perhaps women were inclined to be vain and petty to start with and consequently life on the stage didn't affect them in this way. It merely gave them poise and a fuller knowledge of the realities of existence. And then women on tour had all sorts of small jobs to occupy their time—the

same sort of little personal jobs they had to attend to always, even at home—and men had no resources whatever. If they didn't play golf they hung about the bars, and . . .

Craig's voice behind her suddenly interrupted these analytical and somewhat involved reflections. "You're looking very serious," he remarked. "What are you trying to decide?"

Again that sweet, quick smile flashed up at him. "I was trying to decide whether actors are men—or just actors."

"And actresses?"

"They're always women."

"And women are always actresses?"

She nodded.

"Well, I'm glad I know, though I've had my suspicions for some time. Come along. The car's outside."

CHAPTER X

HERMIONE TRESSCOTT had set Michael down over the Nepean River and beyond the old Emu Ferry Inn—convict built in 1830. From here a few miles would bring him to the first slope of the mountains.

He was the genuine 'swagger' or 'traveller' now, for Mrs. Tresscott had provided him with two somewhat worn grey blankets, an old billy, and sufficient food to last him for one day at least.

And as he trudged on with his swag on his back through the brightness of the spring morning, past the wire-fenced paddocks and the tin-roofed weather-board cottages of small orchardists and poultry farmers, Michael's thoughts were by no means unhappy ones. All the fruit trees were bursting into blossom, and the song of larks made music in the air. Difficult to preserve a gloomy, miserable frame of mind amongst all this light and colour even if one wished to do so. And Michael didn't. He was resolved not to be discouraged by failure should this journey prove abortive and his grandfather refuse him any help in the endeavour to clear his name. Even if it were impossible to reopen his case and prove himself innocent, life still held much that was good.

Almost unconsciously he had been turning over in his mind the project of his book. There was so much material here—material as yet very little used by novelists. Up to the present, with the exception of one or two writers, no one had done much to present the poignant drama of the early days of the colony; the struggle of embittered men and women exiled to this strange and far-off land; or the less sorrowful side of the

picture—the adventure of exploration; the building up of homes; the little farms growing; the imported sheep and cattle increasing season by season.

One hundred and fifty years, and here, from a bleak and terrible beginning, was sprung a great new nation. Possibly it was just the fact that the beginning had been shrouded in so much misery and despair, in so much that was evil, that the telling of the tale had been shirked—particularly by those born in the country. People—especially in New South Wales—had been decidedly touchy in the past. Michael smiled as he remembered his grandfather's story of the well-meaning Governor who, on arrival, quoted Kipling's lines, 'Your birthstain you have turned to good, Forcing strong wills, perverse, to steadfastness,' and thereby ruined for ever his chances of popularity. Everyone was just a little afraid that they might be accused of having had a convict ancestor. Rather absurd that, for the convicts were so soon outnumbered by the 'free settlers' that one might live out one's life in Australia nowadays without ever discovering amongst one's acquaintance a single descendant of those cruelly used men and women of a bygone era. And if one did happen to have a great-great-grandfather or a great-great-grandmother who travelled originally at the Government's expense, weren't some of those transported sentenced either for political or most trivial offences? Not necessarily of the criminal class at all? With such a wealth of material lying ready to his hand, what should he use? thought Michael.

He was mounting Lapston Hill, with all the plain below him spread out in a vast and marvellous panorama, when it suddenly occurred to him that he need not begin at once upon so ambitious a project as a full-length novel. Why not try his hand first at a few

descriptive articles and submit them to local publications? Every step of the way across the mountains was rich in history. At Linden there had been an old convict stockade and flogging-stone; at Woodford another flogging-stone and dark cell, as well as a military dépôt—the buildings of this still standing and serving today as a tea-shop. And on the road itself the miserable chain-gangs had worked and suffered.

When at midday Michael halted by the wayside to boil his billy and eat his hard-boiled eggs in the shade of the thickly growing gum trees, he got out pencil and paper and proceeded to jot down a few notes. As he did so his mind reverted to the arguments he'd taken part in during his fortnight with the Tresscott's. There might be a modicum of truth in Hermione Tresscott's disparagement of this country. Yet she wasn't altogether fair with regard either to its natural beauty or to national characteristics. Wasn't the prospect before him now most lovely? The gum trees growing in dense masses over all the hillsides round him weren't the everlasting grey-green she complained about; the young shoots were tipped with bronze and scarlet—a feast of colour; over old logs trailed the deep rich purple of the sarsaparilla; the queer spiked crimson of the bottle-brush showed here and there against the golden glory of the wattle. And over all was the wide blue sky and far away, blue distances of crag and chasm. One would be blind to deny to this land its own wild beauty. Then, too, had she given the native-born Australian credit for his virility, his friendly good-humour, his generosity? Where in the world would you find greater hospitality and kindness than here? Yet all she's seen was a tendency to brag, to be careless of a pledged word—a slapdash, easy-going attitude to life. That was climatic.

Here there was no hard winter; nothing much to fear from cold and hunger.

Michael put away his notes and packed up his billy, preparatory to taking the road again. As yet, though many cars and lorries had passed him, he'd been offered no free rides.

No sooner was he on his way again, however, than a lorry pulled up beside him. "Want a lift, mate?"

Michael with alacrity climbed up beside the driver.

Another twenty miles of his journey was covered before the lorry, reaching its destination, obliged him to continue once more on foot. But not for long; for, after having walked less than half a mile, a commercial traveller bound for Lithgow picked him up and carried him onwards.

They reached the turn-off for this town of mines and mills early in the afternoon, and Michael determined to push on so that before dark he might find some farm or station where a 'swagger' would be given a shake-down for the night.

Although he was now over the higher mountains and making his way down towards the wide green Bathurst plains, he was still nearly 3,000 feet above sea-level, and the atmosphere was appreciably colder than it had been in the morning when he had said good-bye to Mrs. Tresscott. The prospect of a night in the open, with only his two worn blankets as protection, was not alluring. Shelter in a roadman's tent, or in any out-building, would certainly be preferable.

As he walked on Michael recalled a verse of Wentworth's poem, written when he, a young man of twenty-one, was studying at Cambridge three years after he and his companions had caught their first glimpse of these same plains.

“As a meteor shoots athwart the night
 The boundless champaign burst upon our sight,
 Till, nearer seen, the beauteous landscape grew,
 Opening like Canaan on rapt Israel’s view.”

It would surely take the pen of a much more gifted poet to express the ineffable joy and rapture those three knew when, after their fifteen days of bitter struggle through scrub and timber and across deep gullies and ravines, they saw spread out before them the realization of their dreams, the great rolling plains which promised pasturage for uncounted flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and knew that they had triumphed where so many others had strived and failed.

Wentworth, Blaxland, and Lawson had been written up times out of number, yet Michael felt he might still produce something of interest out of their successful achievement—something which would possibly be considered of sufficient value to merit acceptance as a newspaper article. Or if not of them, then of the convict gangs toiling to cut through the heavy bush this road which the explorers first, and Evans afterwards, had demonstrated would lead to the Canaan of the plains beyond.

He’d send the article when finished to Kathleen Armistage, asking her if she would submit it for him to some journal—provided, of course, she considered it good enough for publication. That this would give him an excellent excuse for re-establishing communication with her was not perhaps acknowledged by his conscious mind. Nevertheless, he walked on into the sunset feeling unaccountably cheered by the thought that she would be the first to read his initial attempt at literary work, and that she would feel bound to send some sort of reply to his letter.

CHAPTER XI

KATHLEEN ARMITAGE, at her desk in her own small sitting-room, was wrestling with the 'Avalon' accounts. She could depend now on at least two hours' uninterrupted work, for lunch was over and Mrs. Montgomery had been persuaded to take an afternoon's nap.

Through the french windows, flung wide to the sunny balcony, came the sweet piping of birds in the garden; the noise of an occasional passing car or tradesman's cart; and drifting over the blue, wide waters of the harbour the distant ring of hammers on a moored steamer, the splash of the ferry, or the clang of the gangway at the wharf.

Very soon summer, with its enervating heat and strongly blowing north-easters would be upon them, but for weeks past the weather had been perfect. That alone made one glad to be alive.

Yet this afternoon Kathleen was aware of a sense of well-being not entirely due to the light and radiance of the day. For the moment monetary worries had ceased to trouble her. In response to her advertisement she had found occupants for her empty rooms, and the interest on the mortgage had been paid. True, some of the guests she had been forced to accept were strongly disapproved of by Miss Hobhouse; but neither this lady nor Mrs. Epping had so far carried out their threats to find another abode more suited to their ideas of 'refinement.' And if most of the Quintos shares had had to be sacrificed—in spite of Gordon Bates' protests that they were now rising in value and likely to go higher—

this was more than counterbalanced by the feeling of relief from any immediate financial worry. Her present staff were satisfactory; John's report from school had been excellent; and, last but not least, a communication by the morning's post had informed her that 'The Editor' would be pleased to accept Mr. Denning's article. 'Payment two guineas on publication.'

She had received a long letter from Maurice less than a week ago, and had been delighted not only to hear all his news, but to read the literary contribution he enclosed. Knowing nothing of the difficulties of freelance journalism—that the placing of any article, however clever, was extremely difficult—she had taken the acceptance of this particular piece of writing, which she considered exceptionally brilliant, as a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, she was gratified by the promptitude of the Editor's reply.

In his letter the young man had told her of his fortnight with the Tresscotts; of more work on a small farm near Bathurst; and he had asked her to write—if she could possibly spare time to scribble a line—to the Post Office at Parkes, as he was making his way still further West at the conclusion of his Bathurst job.

Although Michael had not revealed to her his real name, and had made no mention of his interview with his cousin Moreton Roberts nor his reason for journeying out along the Western Highway, he did do his best to make clear to her the change that had taken place in his outlook on life. He was looking forward now, he told her, instead of brooding on the past and the injustice done to him. And though some day he hoped to be able to demonstrate the truth—that he had suffered for another man's offence—he was determined to concentrate much more on making good in the future than

in efforts, which might prove fruitless, to clear his name.

His letter produced in Kathleen a warm little glow of satisfaction, and she had replied to it immediately. Now as she sat turning over her accounts she found that her mind was much more engaged in framing the second letter she would write to him announcing the acceptance of his article than on the figures before her.

The quiet and stealthy opening of her door announced a disturbance of her solitude. Kathleen looked up to see Clara Walsh before her. "You're all alone, aren't you?" enquired Clara timidly.

At the first glance Kathleen realized that the other woman had been crying. Her stupid, good-natured face was blotched and swollen, and her eyes were red. Poor Clara! What on earth was the trouble? Kathleen was not left in ignorance of it for long.

Closing the door behind her, Mrs. Walsh sank into an easy chair and began her tale. Money, of course! Money, or rather the lack of it. In spite of her attempts to make excuses for her daughter, it was soon apparent from Mrs. Walsh's muddled explanations that Joan, as usual, had been behaving like a selfish little fool. At a roulette party the night before she'd been extremely unlucky.

"You know how these things happen, Kathleen. The poor child didn't *know* she was losing so much. They were using counters, of course, and Joan's like me, I'm afraid, she hasn't much idea of the value of money."

"But she knew the counters represented pounds, shillings, and pence."

"Oh, yes," returned Clara hurriedly. "But she had an idea young Trentham was paying for them and he

wasn't. And then—I suppose they'd all been having drinks during the evening. . . . Things are so different nowadays with the young people to what they were in our day. We can't *judge* them. . . ." ("Oh, can't we," thought Kathleen grimly.) "And, you see, Joan simply *has* to do what the others do. As she says, it would have seemed so extraordinary if she'd stopped playing when she was losing. It would have broken up the party. And besides, of course she was *sure* her luck would turn. They say if you only go on doubling your stake on red or black or something you're *bound* to get back what you've lost. And she did that—and they were taking turns with the Bank—and before the black or the red or whatever it was turned up she had to take the Bank. And it was a *phenomenally* unlucky Bank for her, she said. She was paying out all the time, and in the end her counters were all gone—well, they were gone, really, before she started the Bank."

"Then how did she manage to pay?"

"She gave I O U's," said Clara, in a burst of sobbing. "And just now—on the telephone—Clarice Waring has been talking to me. Saying that her daughter tells her Joan must owe at least . . . at least . . ."

"Well?" said Kathleen.

"Oh, an awful lot," sobbed Mrs. Walsh.

"But surely Joan herself knows what she owes?"

"No, she doesn't—not exactly. You see, she says she was feeling so awful. And she's got a *terrible* headache this morning. I've kept her in bed."

"How much does Clarice Waring imagine Joan lost last night?"

Pinned down to it, Mrs. Walsh had to confess that the owners of the I O U's had compared notes and that the various sums amounted to close on twenty pounds.

"Twenty pounds!" echoed Kathleen. "Heavens, Clara, surely Joan couldn't have been such an idiot as to . . ."

"Things are different with young people nowadays, Kathleen," reiterated Clara stubbornly. "Joan *has* to do what the others—her friends do."

"What rubbish, Clara! If Joan can't afford to lose money she certainly shouldn't gamble."

"But what am I to do? Joan says she'll never be able to show her face amongst them again unless she can pay up by tomorrow at the latest."

"Then I suppose she'll either have to pay or fade into obscurity."

"And be branded as dishonest? Don't you understand, Kathleen, these are debts of honour?"

"I don't see much honour in Joan playing for such high stakes when she hadn't money to meet her liabilities."

"She had two pounds," said Clara feebly. "I gave her all I had before she left."

Kathleen said nothing to this, and Clara, becoming acutely conscious of the silence, went on hurriedly: "Oh, I know I owe you for a fortnight, but the poor child simply *had* to take *something* with her. She knew it was roulette."

"Then she should have stayed at home."

"Oh, Kathleen, you're so *hard*."

"Perhaps I am," returned Kathleen dryly. "But I do at least try to pay my debts."

"So would Joan, *of course*, if she could."

"And can't she?"

"No, of course she can't. Twenty pounds! It's a *frightful* lot."

"Then what does she propose to do?"

"She says she'll throw herself into the harbour."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, Clara. That won't pay her debts."

"But, Kathleen, couldn't you? . . . I know you helped that little Vincent girl, and after all she's nothing to you, and I'm one of your oldest friends. And you've been so much luckier than I have." Tears of self-pity poured down Clara Walsh's fat and furrowed cheeks.

"Clara!" said Kathleen, exasperated. "I can't *afford* to help anyone."

"But you've got the house nearly full again, and you've got money put away."

"I've got a few—a very few—shares. I had to sell most of them to pay the interest on my mortgage."

"Couldn't you sell some more? I'm really *desperate*, Kathleen. I don't know where to turn. I haven't a single thing I could sell or pawn. And my money doesn't come in till the first of the month—and then it's so little. Only about enough to pay for our board here. Oh, I wish I were *dead*! I do really." Poor Clara raised her tear-blotted face to Kathleen's. Something in her expression—something like a rather stupid dog who has been unmercifully beaten—made Kathleen avert her eyes. She *couldn't* help Clara and her fool of a daughter—she *couldn't*. It wasn't fair to her own family! Just as she'd managed to pay off her overdraft and get a small credit balance in the bank again. Damn Clara and her troubles! Why *need* she be such a fool? But, poor dear, she was born like that; and Kathleen knew that no one could accuse Clara of being mean. If *she* had the ready cash she'd never hesitate to help a friend, even if the cash wasn't really hers to give away. That was the sort of fool she was! She never *had* thought of the future—made any provision for it. Happy-go-lucky! Give away what you can't afford, and

then borrow from someone else. All the same, Clara *would* give. Oh, damn, damn, damn! The thought of money—the need of it—withered one's soul.

Suddenly Kathleen pulled her cheque-book towards her. As she did so she remembered something Peter had once said to her: "Poor Kathleen! Always so optimistically scattering loaves of bread upon the harbour! Won't you *ever* learn that not one crumb of them is likely to return? The sharks gobble them up with gusto, my dear. That's all that happens." Here was certainly a fulfilment of Peter's cynical remark. But if one didn't exactly cast bread with any idea of generosity towards sharks, one at least hadn't in one's mind the thought of benefit to one's self from the distributed loaves.

"I'll give you twenty pounds, Clara. . . ."

"Oh, Kathleen, you *are* a darling. But it'll only be a loan. You'll get it back as soon as . . ."

"I'm giving it to you. I don't like loans, and you'd find it exceedingly difficult to repay me."

"I could manage a few shillings a week," said Clara hopefully.

"No. I don't want you to feel the debt hanging over your head. I'm a fool to help you, I know, but I'm doing it only on certain conditions. I expect you to make Joan promise—really promise—that she'll never gamble again as long as she remains here at 'Avalon.' And another thing. Never in the future must your bill to me run on for longer than a fortnight. If you can't pay me more regularly, Joan and you will have to find cheaper rooms."

"Oh, but I *will* pay you, Kathleen. I will."

"Why on earth doesn't Joan try to get a job somewhere?"

"She's tried *all* the film agencies."

"There's other work to be found in the world. What about applying for a mannequin's position?"

"But, Kathleen, none of her friends *work*. They'd think it so *funny*!"

"I don't mind betting most of the girls she knows would think it marvellous to be a mannequin." (As long as they remained ignorant of the hard work entailed, was Kathleen's unspoken thought.) "Margaret Vyner began as a mannequin," she went on, "and now she's a film star."

Clara brightened perceptibly. "I always feel if Joan could only get a chance on the films she'd . . ."

The door opened suddenly and Mrs. Montgomery appeared. "I thought you said you didn't want to be disturbed this afternoon, Kathleen."

"Oh, I'm just going," said Mrs. Walsh. She rose hurriedly, concealing the cheque Kathleen had handed to her.

"And I thought you promised you'd have a rest," said Kathleen, addressing her mother.

"I heard a lot of talking in here, and I knew you couldn't get on with your accounts if . . ."

"I'm sorry I interrupted you," said Clara hastily. "I really didn't know you were so busy. Good-bye." She made a quick exit, and Mrs. Montgomery turned to her daughter. "What on earth did she want?"

"Joan isn't feeling very well."

"I don't wonder. Too many cocktails, I suppose. She didn't get home till three o'clock this morning. Clara will have trouble with that girl. I've said so before, and . . ."

The ringing of the extension telephone on Kathleen's desk interrupted her, and she sat down to wait until the conversation should be finished.

"Who?" said Kathleen. "Oh, how are you?" From the other end of the wire came replies and remarks inaudible to Mrs. Montgomery, but Kathleen's rejoinders roused a quick suspicion in her mother's mind. "All right, I will," said Kathleen. "That would be lovely. In half an hour. Yes. Good-bye." She replaced the receiver.

"Who was that?" asked Mrs. Montgomery sharply.

"Peter Craig. He's motoring out towards Narrabeen on business this afternoon and he thought I might like the drive."

Mrs. Montgomery was almost speechless with indignation. "Did I hear you say you'd go?" she enquired angrily.

"Yes."

"And the accounts you meant to go through?"

"They can wait," said Kathleen calmly, as she pushed her papers into a drawer and turned the key upon them. She was not inwardly as calm as she endeavoured to appear. It was quite probable that a battle-royal was now imminent between her mother and herself on the subject of Peter. At all costs she must keep her temper, but go with him she would. Clara called her hard. Her mother called her soft! She'd just given away twenty pounds which she could ill afford, and she was thoroughly upset. Far too upset to tackle her accounts this afternoon. She wanted to get away from 'Avalon' and all the mental and emotional adjustments that must be made here. To talk to Peter, drive out with him into the sunshine beside the blue ocean, seemed at the moment a most heavenly prospect. Nothing should stop her!"

"You've been seeing that man again, then?"

"I don't know why you should say 'again.' I've never

ceased to see Peter. There may be longish intervals between our meetings, but I'm always glad when we *do* meet. He's one of my oldest and best friends."

"And is Mrs. Deans a friend of yours also?"

"No. I've never met her."

"Kathleen, I forbid you to go out with that man."

"Mother dear, you must surely realize that the time for forbidding is past. I'm no longer a child. I'm a middle-aged woman and must decide things for myself."

"And if anything happens to Mrs. Deans do you propose to console him?" Mrs. Montgomery's tone was one of bitter sarcasm.

A slow colour mounted in Kathleen's face. "I don't think he'd be very likely to turn to me for consolation—now. Perhaps, when we were both young, he might . . ." Suddenly she faced her mother. "Peter says you've always hated him. Is that true?"

"I disliked him from the first, yes."

"Because he was poor and of no consequence. Because you were afraid he and I might grow too fond . . ." Again she checked herself. "Well, it's no use going over what's past and done with, is it? And . . ." Her voice altered and she endeavoured to speak lightly. "You promised me you'd rest this afternoon. Do go back to your room, mother, please."

Mrs. Montgomery rose wearily. She was beaten, and the droop of that usually indomitable figure took from Kathleen any sense of triumph in her victory and left her with a curious pang of pity instead. "Don't grudge me a pleasant run out into the country, mother," she said more gently. "Peter isn't really the dangerous and disreputable character you seem to imagine, and he has a message for me from Peggy. He saw her a week or two ago, and says he would have rung up before but

he's been desperately busy with the wool sales. You see, his work is much more important to him than your precious daughter."

Mrs. Montgomery made no reply. She moved slowly over to the door, opened it, and disappeared without another glance in Kathleen's direction.

CHAPTER XII

BEFORE the mirror in her bedroom Mrs. Armitage wielded her powder-puff, tidied her hair, and put on her hat. But she did this automatically, for the little scene with her mother had jerked her thoughts back to the past—to those hot summer days when she and Peter had first met; had so gaily larked about the beach and surfed together in the sunshine, or in the warm, starlit darkness danced on the verandah to the music of the gramophone.

It was during the Christmas holidays near Broken Bay, and though Peter was merely one of a party of lads as poor as himself, camping in a tent under the stunted gum trees of the sandhills, and she the guest of wealthy and important friends, she'd definitely preferred him to any of the more gilded youths staying at the Murrays' opulently furnished bungalow.

The attachment between them had lasted firmly and strongly for many months afterwards. It was only when John Armitage—the rich and well-connected young Englishman—came on the scene that Mrs. Montgomery's half-veiled antagonism to Peter gave place to open enmity.

Kathleen had defended him hotly in those days. She had not confessed to any 'understanding' between them, but she had taken it for granted that she and Peter were to marry some day. Then, quite suddenly, he faded out of the picture, and after the first queerly

horrible heartache, she decided that she'd been a fool to believe he loved her; that his feeling for her was more than a transitory infatuation.

Curiously enough, up to this moment—or rather the moment when she had said, 'Because you were afraid he and I might grow too fond . . . '—it had never occurred to her to doubt this explanation of Peter's conduct—that he had tired of their too ardent friendship and had let it die a natural death.

Was it something in her mother's face which had suddenly awakened a suspicion that after all Peter might really have cared as deeply as she thought?

With an impatient little gesture Kathleen turned from her mirror. What did it all matter now? Nearly twenty years had passed since then. She'd married John Armitage and Peter had married Amy, and they'd both forgotten that first warm intimacy born merely of propinquity and the physical attraction of youth to youth. Would they have found greater happiness together than they'd found apart?

With a wry little smile Kathleen decided that she herself couldn't have found much less. John Armitage, for all his charm, was a broken reed for any woman to lean upon. Probably, she reflected, it was her life with him—that perpetual bolstering up of his will with hers—that had made her as Clara declared, 'hard.'

No, she wouldn't think of those seven years of troubled matrimony. Poor John! It wasn't his fault that he was weak and vain. He might have been a different man if in the beginning life had not been made so easy for him; if women hadn't spoiled him.

For one thing she had always been thankful. John had been spared the pain of a lingering illness. Physical suffering—even in others—was abhorrent to him. He'd

been spared, too, the knowledge that through his folly and prodigality his wife and little son would be left almost entirely unprovided for.

Across the screen of memory flashed the series of pictures Kathleen had in retrospect so often seen. The country race-track—burnt almost bare by the hot sun; the gaily-dressed women picnicking beside their shining cars under the sheltering gum trees; John, handsome, fair, and debonair in his riding-kit; the horses thundering down the straight; the stumble and fall; and John, gone far beyond the world of women and horses, and all the gay diversions that he loved, brought in on a hurdle through the little silent crowd.

Well, he'd given her her own young John and dowered the boy with something of his fair good looks and charm. Nothing of his vacillating, pleasure-loving nature though! There was a stronger strain in John the second—a likeness in many ways to his resolute old grandmother.

Again Kathleen's thoughts reverted to Mrs. Montgomery, and once more her conscience smote her at the picture of the old lady rising from her chair and walking in a sort of crumpled silence towards the door of the little sitting-room.

But why need her mother so bitterly oppose her friendship with Peter Craig? What had poor Peter done to rouse this detestation in the old woman's heart? Certainly there was Mrs. Deans; but John Armitage had engaged in many adventures of a similar nature and little had been said. John's affairs had never lasted long, however. Perhaps, Kathleen thought with a crooked little smile, it was Peter's faithfulness to his mistress that outraged Mrs. Montgomery's sense of decency.

Kathleen hardened her heart. Her mother had never been fair to Peter; and she herself would be unfair to him if she sacrificed his friendship to gratify her mother's illogical antipathy.

Through the open window Kathleen saw a big car pull up at the front of the house and heard the honk of a horn. Picking up her gloves, she ran down the stairs, along the front path, and through the garden gate.

"Good girl!" said Peter, getting out to open the door for her. "I'm a trifle early. I thought I might have to wait."

"I had only to stick on my hat." She stepped up into the car, and in another moment they were off. How pleasant it was to be able to lean back in this softly-cushioned seat; to be driven swiftly on through the brightness and colour of the day; and to talk or not to talk, as the spirit moved her. Peace!

She had closed her eyes and now opened them to find that Craig, glancing aside from the road ahead for a fraction of a second, was regarding her. "Sleepy?" he asked.

"No," she answered with a deep sigh, "just content for the moment to forget all my little difficulties. I often wonder if peace isn't the greatest happiness possible to mankind."

"Still having your worries, then?"

"Other people's worries to-day."

"And you shoulder them."

"One's forced to sometimes. Tell me about Peggy. She wrote saying she'd seen you. You evidently made a hit with her."

"And so did she with me. A nice, natural little kid." He went on to tell her of his attendance at the per-

formance of *Southern Belles* and his meeting with Peggy afterwards.

"So one of my geese isn't so goosy," she teased him.

"No, I'll admit she struck me as being quite a promising cygnet."

"And my other one, Maurice Denning. I've good news of him, too."

"The waiter chap?"

She nodded.

"Didn't he turn out to be a crook, as I prophesied?"

"Of course not."

"Then why the false name?"

"Because he'd been in gaol."

Craig threw back his head and laughed long and loudly.

"Oh, you can laugh as much as you like, but he was sentenced for something he didn't do."

"Naturally!" agreed Craig, still chuckling.

"Very well, if you're going to take it like that, I shan't tell you about him. And it's a most interesting story."

"I'm sure it is."

"I shall tell you all the same," said Kathleen illogically. "And I don't care in the least whether you believe it or not."

"Go ahead."

So Kathleen went ahead, and recounted the tale of Miss Hobhouse's ring, gave a brief résumé of Maurice's farewell letter, and the second communication she'd received from him, ending with her triumphant 'Payment Two Guineas.' Although she did her best to conceal the fact that her ex-waiter attributed his more healthy outlook on life to her influence, Craig was quick enough to guess that he had done so.

"You seem extremely interested in him," he remarked dryly as she finished.

"Of course I am."

"He probably imagines himself in love with you."

"How can you talk such nonsense. People don't fall in love with women of my age. I'm almost old enough to be his mother."

"That's nothing. Why should he go on writing these damn letters to you otherwise? All this sob stuff about leading a better life since you've shown him the light."

"It isn't sob stuff. And I didn't say anything about a 'better life' or my having uplifted him. You're making me out a most priggish, sanctimonious creature. You're detestable."

Craig grinned round at her. "And you, my dear, are incurably romantic. However, I expect in a few weeks' time he'll be turning up again at the *Lame Dogs' Home* and will try to touch you for a fiver."

"You hope so, you mean, so that you'll be able to say 'I told you so.' But you're not always right, are you? You were sceptical about Peggy, and you admit now that you were mistaken. She's sent me money every week regularly, poor child."

"The poor child won't be sending it much longer."

"Is the tour ending? She was afraid it wouldn't last long."

"Dantry tells me it's finishing in about ten days' time."

"Poor little Peg! I'm so sorry."

"They're doing a new musical comedy shortly at His Majesty's. Not this syndicate, but the usual firm. It's a good show. I saw it in London, and I've asked Dantry to put in a word for her with their producer."

"Oh, how nice of you!"

"Better not say anything about it to her. Nothing may come of it."

"All the same, it was sweet of you to bother."

"I'm always sweet. Hasn't that fact ever struck you before?"

"Often," returned Kathleen. And now her voice had lost the bantering tone she often adopted when with him, and was suddenly quite simply sincere.

Craig stared straight ahead, with his brows drawn down in a little frown, and there was silence for a moment between them. The car was now running smoothly over the red sandstone road through French's Forest. On all sides waved the thickly-growing gum trees, and amongst the undergrowth masses of wild flowers and flowering shrubs were breaking into blossom—coloured heaths, bottle-brush, native daphne, pink boronia, mauve orchids—while the scent of the blossoming pittosporum trees flooded the air with fragrance.

Every here and there as the road swept up to the crest of a hill, through gaps in the serried ranks of tree-trunks, one caught a gleam of intense and vivid blue—the ocean lying smooth as bright enamel beyond grassed or wooded headlands, and stretching clear and empty to the horizon.

"I've stolen this afternoon from the office," admitted Craig. "But my partner's used to my taking a few hours off occasionally."

"Aren't you going out on business?"

"Business and pleasure combined," he admitted. And went on to tell her that he wanted to look at building sections and the site of a proposed golf course between Narrabeen and Pitt Water.

"I thought you were a wool-buyer."

"So I am, but I have an occasional investment 'on the side.' Some of my speculations have helped me considerably when wool was down. Have you ever been to a wool sale?"

"No."

"I'll take you one day, if you'd care to come."

"I'd like to."

The business near Narrabeen was soon concluded, and then Craig drove on along the coast. He'd come provided with a thermos from the club, he told her, and they could have their tea where they pleased. "How's this?" he asked at last.

He had turned the car off the main road, and it was a few seconds before Kathleen realized that they had reached the small sheltered bay where once the Murrays' ornate bungalow had stood. The house had been burnt down years ago, and there were many summer cottages now dotted about the sand-hills and the bushed foreshores which twenty years earlier had shown no sign of human habitation.

"Been built over a lot since the old days, hasn't it?" remarked Craig.

"Yes, it's difficult to recognize it as the same place," returned Kathleen in as matter-of-fact a tone as his. She could be as unsentimental as he, she decided, with a queer little ache in her heart. He'd evidently long since forgotten all their shared associations with the place. Well, so had she, for that matter. It wasn't often she looked back as she'd done this afternoon.

The beach—which in the summer would be thronged with surfers—was now practically deserted, and Craig pulled up the car at a point where they could look far along the headlands of the coast and watch the great Pacific rollers come sweeping in to curl and break in

foam upon the curving line of the sand. "Tea in the car or outside?"

"Oh, let's get out. The sun's so warm and lovely."

He extracted the tea-basket from the back of the car, and they walked a little further down towards the sea. In a hollow on the sand-hills he spread a rug for her. "You'd better handle the thermos. I've no idea what they put in to eat. Sandwiches and cakes of sorts, it seems."

But while they were having their picnic meal Craig suddenly revealed the fact that he wasn't altogether unmindful of the past. "It must be nearly twenty years since we were here together," he remarked. "They hadn't made the road down to the beach then."

"That was when I was staying with the Murrays, wasn't it?" Kathleen managed to convey by her question that her memory was a trifle hazy as to the happenings of those far-off days. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Craig was munching a sandwich in quite evident contentment. No regrets for a dead love here! And why should there be? 'Incurably romantic' was the phrase he'd applied to her less than an hour ago. Only 'incurable romantics' invested the sentimental attachments of early youth with any importance.

"If you had your way, would you go back to those days—live your life again?" he asked suddenly.

"Not if I had to go through . . ." she stopped suddenly. To no one—not even to her mother—had she ever confessed the bitter disillusionment and unhappiness her marriage had brought her. "Not if I had to face some of the difficulties I've had since then, but I suppose everyone feels that. No, I don't think I want to live my life over again."

"That doesn't sound as though you'd been too happy."

She shrugged and managed to achieve a perfectly natural smile. "I've had my share of happiness, I suppose. But I think we all start off expecting too much from life. And perhaps I was rather spoilt. I had too good a time. We weren't so frightfully well off, but Mother and Daddy never refused me anything. I never felt that other girls—richer girls like the Murrays—had more than I had. Since then I've been forced to battle for myself. To be the breadwinner."

"That isn't such a great hardship, is it? There's a certain amount of joy in winning through to a place in the world—making it yourself—not stepping into a ready-made niche."

"Oh, yes, I dare say."

"And, after all, that's only money. I wasn't thinking entirely of material things."

"They occupy a good deal of one's attention," she remarked dryly. "Especially when one has responsibilities towards others."

"But you've done very well with your place, haven't you?"

"Oh, rather!" she answered hastily.

"The lame dogs don't eat you out of house and home, then?"

Kathleen laughed. "The poor lame dogs wouldn't grow very fat on all they get from me, I'm afraid." And then to break the silence that fell between them, she went on: "You didn't answer your own question. Didn't apply to yourself, I mean? Would *you* like to go back? Start all over again?"

"I don't think I'd mind. I've enjoyed my struggle."

"That's good," said Kathleen, endeavouring to convey great heartiness. What did she want him to say? she asked herself angrily. That he looked back yearningly

to the past? Regretted the break that had come to their early intimacy?

She rose and began putting the cups together. "If we don't start soon I shan't be back in time for dinner."

"I'll get you there. Six-thirty, isn't it?"

Together they packed the basket and returned to the car. During the drive home Kathleen made every effort to appear as light-hearted as she had been when they started out. She chattered on gaily about her guests; imitating Miss Hobhouse and Mrs. Epping, and telling stories of their reception of the newcomers.

But in some inexplicable way she knew that the peace of which she had spoken earlier had flown.

Apparently Craig noticed no change in her. He laughed at her stories, and when he set her down at her door, soon after six, he reminded her of her promise to attend a wool sale with him.

"You ring me up," she told him, "and I'll be there. Good-bye. It was a lovely drive. Thanks so much."

But as the car drove away, and she walked slowly towards the house, she was conscious of some queerly desolate feeling—as though she'd lost someone who had been very dear to her.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Michael eventually reached Parkes he found Kathleen's two letters addressed to Maurice Denning awaiting him. He had purposely refrained from using his own name, for though the post office officials might not recognize him, it was more than probable that the name would lead to his identification. Until he had seen his grandfather, whose station, Koolandra, was situated some fifteen miles outside the town, he hoped to escape the notice of anyone to whom his face might be familiar.

He read through both letters eagerly, and experienced a very real thrill in learning that his first effort at journalism had been successful. He had been by no means as optimistic as to its chances of acceptance as Kathleen, and he had sense enough to realize that these two guineas might be the first and last his pen would ever earn for him. But it was at least encouraging, and he would persevere. The money, too, would be more than acceptable. Though he had added a few pounds to his small store by work secured along the road, his financial position could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as assured. Compared, however, to his state of destitution when a beneficent fate had led him to Kathleen Armitage's door nearly three months ago, he was now a man of means. And far more than the money in his wallet was the feeling of restored confidence in himself. He was young and strong, and he'd make his way in the world somehow, whatever

the outcome of his interview with his grandfather might be. Kathleen and 'The Editor' together could not have timed their encouraging missives better. In a few hours he would most probably be face to face with Sam McDowell, whose jutting eyebrows and grim, clean-shaven jowl had certainly inspired his grandson, in the days of his early youth, with a good deal more fear than affection.

On his return from England Michael had grown sophisticated and self-assured enough to hold his own with the old man. But he had never felt altogether at his ease in his grandfather's presence. How the somewhat grim old gentleman had ever managed to beget the jolly little woman who had been Michael's mother, the boy could never understand. And she—his mother—hadn't an ounce of diffidence or apprehension in dealing with her father. She was as devoted to him as he to her, but she certainly treated him with an entire lack of filial deference. And Michael as a little boy, trembling sometimes at what he called her 'cheek,' was amazed to see the hard old face of his august grandparent break into a smile instead of hardening into the scowl the small boy had expected.

Before he left with his parents for England Michael was old enough to realize that 'Old Sam,' as he was known throughout the district, hadn't in the beginning altogether approved of his daughter's marriage to Deering, the English jackeroo.

But Michael's father, too, had 'a way' with the old man; and though McDowell held the purse-strings, refusing to settle any definite sum of money upon his daughter, he never failed to provide handsomely for her. At ten years of age, too, Michael had sense enough to be aware that their departure for England was a grief

to the old man; but, as usual, Molly Deering managed to get her own way.

Mrs. Deering had travelled out to visit her father on more than one occasion when Michael was at school, and it was understood that they would return to Australia when he left Cambridge.

The death of his mother necessitated his return alone; and on his reunion with 'Old Sam' Michael knew at once that in some way his presence, instead of being a comfort to the stern old man, merely served to bring home to him more sharply the loss of the daughter he had most truly loved. He didn't wish to have the young man with him at Koolandra, but he did desire his grandson's advancement to political usefulness, and was willing to pay handsomely to help him on his way.

Yes, it must have been a severe blow to Sam McDowell's pride to have his grandson sentenced to gaol for manslaughter. Nevertheless, Michael was now convinced that Moreton Roberts had from the first done his best to undermine 'Old Sam's' confidence in his grandson.

Looking back over the past, Michael realized that even before the charge was made against him, his grandfather's letters had grown noticeably cooler in tone. He'd suspected nothing at the time, and although during that bitter period in prison he'd often been puzzled by his grandfather's apparent heartlessness in neither seeing him nor writing to him, it was not until his last interview with his cousin that he had been sure that a cunning campaign of calumny had been directed against him. How fortuitously his arrest and trial had played into the lawyer's hands! Would it be possible to convince 'Old Sam' that Roberts had persistently

blackened his character in order to serve his own ends? No, he didn't hope to be able to accomplish this without a grain of evidence to support his own suspicions. Perhaps this journey of his would be ineffectual, but at least he would insist upon an interview with the old man, and endeavour to prove to him that Molly Deering's son was not the hopeless waster he was certain Roberts had represented him to be.

It was early in the morning when Michael reached Parkes, for he had spent the previous night in a roadman's camp only a few miles outside the town. Now, after securing his letters, he left the high concrete wheat silos of the railway station behind him and set out along the red road. Around him for miles across the gently undulating plains stretched the emerald wheat—thousands and thousands of acres of it. Dotted amongst the crop the kurrajong trees, pines, and rosewood added a note of deeper colour; and an occasional belt of gum trees fringed an upland pasture, drawing a bronze-green tracing upon the deep blue sky. Surely even Mrs. Tresscott couldn't fail to find beauty here!

He was no longer travelling on the Western Highway, and the road with its sheltering trees and native grasses was surveyed and fenced with a width of two chains in order to afford pasturage for travelling stock. The brilliant green of the crop in the bright sunlight, the colour of the rich ploughed loam—all shades of rose and umber—the silver sheen of gum-tree boles and branches and their feathery foliage made up a picture of real loveliness. Probably Mrs. Tresscott would only see the dust of the road, the already dry watercourses which cut the hard red earth into gaping fissures every here and there amongst the trees, or the stark and ghostly trunks of dead ring-barked gums.

After the first mile or two Michael, like the travelling stock, was glad enough of the occasional shelter of the trees along the wayside, for the sun blazed down from a cloudless sky over the wide wheat acres.

At last an empty wool truck rattled up behind him and the driver halted. "Want a lift, mate?" It was the usual salutation which Michael had come to know well and to appreciate greatly. He clambered up beside the driver and learned that with him he could travel to within a short distance of Koolandra. Learned, too, that 'Old Sam' was sub-dividing the station; had already sold off the greater part of his land to small farmers engaged in wheat growing and raising 'fat lambs,' and that less than two thousand acres and the homestead of Koolandra now remained.

"He's as hard as my boot, McDowell," observed the chatty driver. "He don't encourage 'travellers' on the place. Better give Koolandra a miss, mate."

"Well off, though, isn't he?" enquired Michael.

"Rolling," replied the other tersely. "Been giving away a lot lately. Oh, not to the poor working man, not likely! Built a hospital somewheres, so they say. Likes to see his name in the papers. Playing up for to get himself made a sir before he dies. But he won't die yet awhile—not he. He's as tough as a kangaroo's tail. Well, I turn off here. They're shearing around Condobolin. You might get work there. Plenty of wool trucks on the road to get yerself a ride. So long."

Michael watched him drive off, then trudged on to turn in at the well-remembered gates. The homestead was over the rise of the hill, not half a mile from the road.

Well, here he was at his journey's end! 'Old Sam' must at least give him a spot of lunch, he decided with

a grim smile. If he didn't offer it, Mrs. Malloney in the kitchen would see to it that he was fed.

The white, one-storied wooden homestead, with its wide verandahs and out-buildings, stood amongst the plantation of English trees and native gums. It was an unpretentious residence for a wealthy man. But it was comfortable enough—Michael knew that—and the garden surrounding it was beautiful. This sun-baked soil, given sufficient water, would grow anything. And at the back, by the dairy and laundry-sheds, the old wind-mill pumped thousands of gallons a day from the artesian well. No need to stint water on the lawns and flower-beds. At least half a dozen sprinklers were in operation as Michael 'humped his bluey' along the drive.

Now for it! Up the verandah steps to the open front door. Through the fly-screen he could see the wide, cool hall—the beauty of its Persian rugs contrasting strangely with faded photographs of prize rams and horses hung in lieu of pictures upon the walls. How his mother had detested all those untidy-looking photographs, but even she couldn't get 'Old Sam' to do away with them.

For a second Michael hesitated. Should he thrust forward the screened door and enter the house or stand here and ring the bell? A rum go this! he reflected. Ringing the bell at the door of your mother's old home! But that's what he'd better do. He'd got to find someone to announce his arrival to 'Old Sam.' He'd dump his swag out here, at any rate.

As he slung the roll of blankets off his shoulders he wondered what poor plump little Molly would have thought if, as a girl, she could have looked into the future and seen her only son arriving with his swag at her father's door!

Someone was coming from the back of the house in answer to his ring. Murdoch! The returned 'digger' who for the past seventeen years had 'valeted' 'Old Sam.' Not that McDowell would admit that anyone 'valeted' him. That was altogether too foppish a phrase for the bluff old farmer. Murdoch, he said, was his odd-job man; and he and the Malloneys—Sarah, Bill and Flossie, their daughter—constituted the entire indoor staff of the homestead.

For a second Murdoch failed to recognize the visitor, but when he did so his jaw dropped and he seemed incapable of speech.

"Say you're pleased to see me, Murdoch," said Michael, with a jauntiness he was far from feeling.

Murdoch's astonished face broke into a wide smile. "Too right I am, Mister Michael, but . . ." he hesitated.

"You don't think 'Old Sam' will give me much of a welcome? Is he in?"

"We're expecting him back to lunch any time now. He's took the car out to where the tractor's working. They're ploughing the ninety-acre paddock."

"And you judge that he won't rejoice greatly at my arrival. Has he ever spoken of me?"

"Not to us in the house, but I did happen to overhear him talking of you to Mr. Roberts when last he was up here—about six weeks ago that'll be now—I didn't eavesdrop, you understand, Mister Michael, but . . ."

"Well?"

"I was in and out of the office—they was sitting there after dinner—with drinks and suchlike, and I couldn't help but catch a few words. And it seemed to me that all Mr. Roberts said wasn't helping you with the boss.

Me and the Malloneys talked it over; and we felt we could of been more diplomatic, in a manner of speaking. Mr. Roberts didn't seem to see he was putting the boss's back up. After all, what you done was no crime—it was a accident, when all said and done. And Mr. Roberts needn't of told the boss that *he* was in a sense really to blame—letting you have too much money. Letting you think you could get away with anything. Twist him round your little finger."

"So he said that, did he?"

"Well, words to that effect. There'd been some talk of a letter. The boss wondered if he'd been right in sending it. And Mr. Roberts said he'd do anything in his power to give you help and advice and so on, but the truest kindness anyone could show you was to let you work out your own salvation. You'd never do it if you was spoon-fed, like you'd always been. Encouraged in extravagance and dissipation."

"Very interesting, Murdoch. Thanks for telling me. Anything more?"

"Well, you see I couldn't stay in the room long at a time, Mister Michael. I had to put two and two together, as you might say. But I've give you about the grist of it. I'm afraid the boss won't see you."

"Oh, yes, he will. I'll wait in the office. You needn't even know of my arrival. I found the door open and I walked in. If I'm not invited to lunch in the dining-room I dare say Mrs. Malloney can find a chop and a cup of tea in the kitchen for a poor swagger, can't she?"

"Too right she can, Mister Michael. She'll have a good feed waiting for you. But I'm hoping you'll have it in the dining-room with the boss."

"Thanks for your good wishes, Murdoch. But I fear

there'll be no killing of the fatted calf for me. I'll see you later—and the Malloneys too."

He nodded to Murdoch and moved on down the hall to the big, comfortable sitting-room known as 'the office,' while Murdoch hurried off to the kitchen to convey to the Malloneys the exciting news of the prodigal's return.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER the brilliant sunshine of the verandah, Michael found the big wood-panelled office dark and cool, for fly-screens at all the open windows served to dim the light. They did not, however, shut out the sound of birds in the garden and the drowsy whir of a mowing-machine on the lawn, nor the scent of newly-cut grass and the massed stocks in the flower borders. 'Old Sam' had always been a lover of trees and flowers, and few homesteads on the Western Plains could boast so fine a garden.

Michael threw himself down in one of the roomy, well-worn leather chairs beside the open fireplace. He knew how the huge logs could roar up that big chimney on cold winter nights, but summer now was at hand and fires no longer necessary.

His eyes travelled round the well-known room. Book-cases, guns, and a collection of aboriginal spears and boomerangs lined the walls, together with more framed photographs of country shows, of polo matches, of prize-winning horses and stock. With a sad stirring of his heart Michael saw again the many pictures of his mother. Enlarged snapshots of her as a child on her pony; of her as a schoolgirl jumping her little mare at the local show; of her in her wedding-dress. Innumerable photographs taken during her residence in England, and one large portrait by Lazlo hung above the heavy roll-topped desk at which 'Old Sam' transacted all his business. Michael well remembered the letter from McDowell ordering his daughter to get herself

painted by the best man in London and damn the expense. But nowhere, he noticed with a grim little smile, were there any photographs of himself, either on the walls or amongst the dozens of silver cups and trophies which littered the mantelpiece and shelves.

After a moment Michael rose from his chair to examine more closely some of these faded mementoes of days gone by, and suddenly, in looking at a group—obviously taken at a polo tournament or picnic races somewhere—his attention was caught and held, not by his mother, but by another figure. Kathleen Armitage! She had changed very little, though the cut of the women's dresses proclaimed the date of the picture as being only a few years after he and his parents had left for England.

This must have been taken at some big country gathering during Molly Deering's first visit to her father. So Kathleen had perhaps been a friend—or at any rate an acquaintance—of his mother's. Nothing very strange about that, seeing that most of the well-to-do residents of the State were known to one another; and he was aware that Mrs. Armitage had not always occupied her present position.

Yet the fact of discovering a portrait of her here in his grandfather's room at Koolandra excited him as something miraculous and moving. This old photograph had hung upon the walls, and Kathleen had looked down at him with her frank and friendly smile on every visit he had paid his grandfather since his return from Cambridge. How queer that was! And nothing had told him—no premonition had reached him—that one woman in this group would some day so influence his life!

He was still staring at the picture when the door

opened and his grandfather entered the room. The inner excitement of which he was aware in some way alleviated the embarrassment of this meeting with the old man. It was almost as though Kathleen stood beside him, restoring his confidence in himself, and giving him power to deal with the situation without self-consciousness.

McDowell recognized him instantly. He stood quite still within the doorway—a powerfully-built, weather-beaten, grey-haired man who carried his years lightly.

“Why have you come here?” he asked. “I thought I’d made it plain to you that I’d done with you.”

“You’ve treated me damned unjustly,” said Michael. “You’ve got to listen to me once, at least, before we part for ever.”

‘Old Sam’ closed the door behind him and came forward into the room. “If you’d a particle of pride,” he remarked quietly, “you wouldn’t come whining to me with your hard-luck story.”

“I haven’t come whining,” returned Michael. “And if it hadn’t been for this woman,” he tapped the photograph, “I’d never have come at all.”

“Don’t drag in your mother’s name,” said the old man sharply. “You won’t influence me by doing that.”

“I wasn’t referring to my mother. It’s someone else in this old picture—Mrs. Armitage. Did you ever know her?”

McDowell was obviously thrown out of his stride by this seemingly irrelevant remark. “What the hell has she got to do with it?” he asked heatedly.

“A good deal,” said Michael. “I was starving—yes, literally starving—when she gave me my first job at ‘Avalon’ three months ago. And she did more than that. She gave me back my belief in human nature. I

was gaoled for an offence I never committed, and when I came out you'd refused to help me. You don't perhaps realize that a man who's done 'time' doesn't find it very easy to procure employment. Even if I'd been guilty of killing Davis—and I wasn't—it doesn't show criminal tendencies. But no one stops to consider that. A man who's been in gaol is a crook—it isn't safe to employ him. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Armitage I might have been over the harbour bridge long before this, for I'd sworn I'd see you in hell before I appealed to you again."

"And yet you're here?"

"Yes, I'm here because from her I learned that it was only my own sense of injury and bitter resentment that prevented me from making another effort to convince you that the story I told at my trial was true."

"If it's money you want . . ."

"It isn't money—at least, not money for my own personal needs. I haven't gone back on my resolve not to accept a penny piece from you until you realize the truth that I was wrongfully imprisoned."

'Old Sam' laughed shortly. "You're still not man enough to own up, then?"

"I can't own up to something I've not done. If you've any sense of justice at all you'll employ another solicitor—*not* Moreton Roberts, who's done his best all along to represent me as worthless—to reopen my case."

"No one can do that."

"There are three people in the world somewhere who know I wasn't in my car when Davis was killed. The young fool who went off with the car, and the man and the woman who saw him take it and saw me set off in pursuit."

"Moreton could have found them if they existed."

"Did he try very hard to do so? I'm positively certain

he didn't. And I *know*—you needn't ask me how I know it, for I've no proof at all except my own unshakable conviction—that dear Cousin Moreton is delighted at the breach between you and me. In what way he benefits by it, I can't say. Probably you're the best judge of that. I was fond of pleasure, extravagant, and not much of a worker, I'll admit, before this disaster came upon me. But I've a shrewd suspicion that he represented me to you as an incorrigible waster. And I've never been that. I might have become one after my release—I had no hope and no chance of earning an honest living until some merciful providence threw me in Kathleen Armitage's way. And you haven't answered my question. Did you know her? She's here in this group. Was she a friend of my mother's?"

"I know nothing about her except that her husband was killed soon after that picture was taken."

"Killed?"

"At the Kolong Picnic Races. But what has all this to do with you? If you've paid me this visit merely to discuss Mrs. Armitage . . ."

"I probably shouldn't have mentioned her if I hadn't seen that photograph. But she had faith in me—just as my mother would have done if she had been alive. Mrs. Armitage, at any rate, believes I'm capable of telling the truth about myself."

"She may think it's to her advantage to believe you—knowing you to be my grandson."

"She doesn't know that. I called myself Maurice Denning."

"If she gave you a job, why didn't you stick to it?"

"Because something happened in the boarding-house she runs. One of the guests thought she'd lost a ring.

She hadn't. She'd dropped it in a corner. But in the meantime the police were called in, and I was identified as a gaol-bird. I couldn't stay after that."

"Why not, if she was fool enough to believe in you?"

"Her guests would have objected to my being there. But she's written to me. I've two letters from her here in my pocket. She tells me she knows I won't allow my life to be wrecked by what's happened. And I won't, in spite of the enmity of my cousin Moreton."

"Why don't you add, and your grandfather's?"

"Because I haven't definite proof yet that you are my enemy. You're disappointed in me—perhaps you'd cause to be—but not as much as you've been led to believe."

"If you've been as hard up as you say you have—starving—wasn't it rather a waste of money to come all this way out West?"

"It didn't cost me anything. My swag's on your front verandah."

"You begged your way?" interjected the old man angrily.

"If I had done, who'd be to blame for it? Not I." Michael's effort at self-control was wearing thin. His voice shook now with ill-suppressed fury. "But as it happens I haven't accepted charity. I've worked, and earned money. I won't trouble you further. I've told you what I want you to do. What I think, in common justice to me, you *ought* to do. Employ another solicitor to go into the case again—to advertise for those missing witnesses. You can't give me back the two years you've let me suffer in gaol by your damned hardness of heart, but, by God, if you don't make some effort to clear my name now that you've heard the truth from my own

lips, it's not you who need talk of disowning me. It's I who'll be ashamed that my mother ever had you for a father." Without another glance at the old man, Michael walked across to the door, opened it, and slammed it violently behind him.

CHAPTER XV

NOTWITHSTANDING all his good resolutions, Michael was aware that he had failed to keep his temper as he had genuinely wished to do. But could any human being remain unruffled when confronted with such injustice and unbelief? Unruffled? To himself Michael repeated the word, smiling grimly. Very inadequate it seemed to express his present state of mind! He was seething with rage and indignation. Never again would he appeal to this horny-hearted old man! He wouldn't even accept a crust of bread in the Koolandra kitchen, though any broken-down 'traveller' upon the road might look upon a hearty meal at a station-owner's expense as his incontrovertible right.

To go on his way without a word to the Malloneys, however, would appear churlish, and so he moved down the hall towards the servants' quarters to get his hail and farewell over as quickly as possible.

Within ten minutes, with his swag on his back, he was once more out in the hot sunlight of the Koolandra drive, with the homestead behind him. Not until he gained the main road again did the tension of his mind relax.

Well, that was that! He'd done with 'Old Sam' for all time. And he'd taken nothing and would take nothing from him until he acknowledged that he'd done his grandson an irreparable wrong.

Anger had certainly deprived him of appetite. Even if his pride had permitted him to do so, he couldn't have swallowed a mouthful of the hot luncheon which Mrs.

Malloney had done her best to force him to eat, but recollection of the cup of tea she'd poured out for him returned to tantalize him. He was parched with thirst.

Michael found himself smiling sardonically at his own expense. Refusing even the tea! Well, he'd stuck to his resolve not to be beholden to his grandfather for anything whatever; still, he was damned thirsty, and a most uncomfortable hollow feeling was making itself manifest within him.

Passing a creek, he filled his billy; then kindled a fire by the roadside, and unpacked tea and bread and cheese from his swag.

The hot tea and the scrap of food he nibbled produced a decided improvement, both mentally and physically, and when he had stamped out the ashes of his fire, and was ready to resume his journey, he was in a much more philosophic mood.

After all, he was no worse off this afternoon than he had been in the morning.

What to do now? Better make his way back to the Tresscotts, put in another week or two working for them, and then on to the city. Surely there, if he concentrated all his faculties upon the problem, he might find some clue to the identity of the three people who could establish his innocence.

Since his interview with 'Old Sam' Michael's mind had hardened to one resolve. He *would* clear himself somehow, if only to prove wrong that damned old . . . Michael to himself muttered a very impolite word.

For the next few days, as he travelled back along the road he'd come, Michael succeeded, by means of free rides in passing vehicles and an odd job or two, to keep

untouched the small but precious store of money in his wallet.

Then one afternoon, when he was footing it along the highway within a few miles of the mountains, he sighted ahead a car with an obviously flat tyre pulled up in the shade of the gum trees by the roadside. As he drew nearer he observed that the car was a disreputable two-seater, and that the driver, with his down-at-heel suede shoes, his grease-spotted slacks, and his dirty pink shirt, looked as battered and uncared for as his car. He had been struggling with an inefficient and worn-out jack for some time before Michael joined him and offered to assist him.

At last by their united efforts they managed to persuade the recalcitrant jack to raise the car so that the change of tyre could be effected.

Naturally, after this Michael was invited to take the vacant seat beside the driver, and they drove on together.

It was not long before young Deering had his new acquaintance summed up. The shabby, flashy little man had no idea how quickly his braggadocio gave an index to his character. He had been an actor. Was one still when he could get a 'shop.' But in this country native talent wasn't appreciated. Imported comedians—the only ones working—were all of them duds who'd failed in England or the States, but because they boasted that they'd had overseas experience, they were acclaimed here as stars. And all they'd done was to appear in some tin-pot show on tour. New York! London! They might have read about such places, or walked up and down the Strand or Broadway once or twice, but they'd damned well never been starred in any Metropolitan production. In any case the stage in this country had

gone to the dogs. No one in management knew an artiste when they saw one!

Michael gathered that theatrical affairs being at such a low ebb in the Commonwealth, his companion had turned his attention to the turf. He was now on his way back to Sydney from one of the country race meetings. But apparently the meeting in question hadn't proved as profitable as he'd hoped.

Before they had gone far Michael realized that he was being carefully sounded as to the prospects of a loan. No, not a loan, an investment. There was a good little mare—he wasn't at liberty to give her name—who'd been pulled in the country. The jockey was a dirty little swine. She'd have another boy up at Rose Hill and she must win there. A chance to clean up a packet! And if Michael had a fiver . . .

No, returned Michael decidedly. He was down and out. Hadn't a cent to invest in any racing venture, however sure a thing it might be.

The little man was obviously used to rebuffs of this sort and took them cheerfully enough. Reverting to his former subject, he went on to expatiate upon his past triumphs on the stage, and his daughter's talent. He wasn't returning to Sydney tonight, only going as far as Lithgow, as he wanted to see her show. "God knows what they're doing in a one-horse place like that, but they're on their way back to town. Tour's finishing, and I'm not sorry. It's not the sort of show she should be with." She'd soon get another shop, he went on. A clever little girl like that wouldn't be out for long. Clever was too mild a term to apply to her. She'd a touch of genius really, and had never yet been given her chance. Same old story, of course! She wasn't an 'English' artiste. A girl might be a second Pavlova, but

born and bred and trained for the stage out here, who would look at her?

"What's her name?" enquired Michael idly. But when the answer came: "Vincent. Peggy Vincent," he started in such astonishment that his companion couldn't fail to notice the impression the name had made.

"You've heard of her, then?" he remarked complacently. "Or perhaps of me. Bobby Vincent. A comedian, laddie, who's topped the bill more than once."

"I'm not very well up in theatrical matters. But I do know your daughter's name."

"Have you seen this show *Southern Belles* she's with?"

Michael replied that he had not.

"You'll be able to have a look at it tonight, then. Peg'll manage to get me a pass, and I'll take you along. I don't mind being seen with a chap who's humping his bluey. Might come to it myself some time."

"Thanks, but I don't know that I'll be staying in the town," said Michael. "I want to push on."

He was determined that nothing would induce him to see Peggy in company with this shoddy little man. Poor kid! He'd gathered from remarks made by Mrs. Armitage, and from Peggy herself, that her father was a great deal more of a liability than an asset to her. Not that Peggy had ever spoken slightly of the parent who apparently only troubled to look her up when she happened to be in a position to assist him financially, but she had often recalled the hard times her mother had fought through. Somehow he felt sure that Peggy herself would not relish any stranger being present during her interview with her father. Not that

'stranger' was the right word when applied to himself. He and Peggy had been good friends. She was a dear little kid, and though she might not possess the amount of talent her father credited her with—implying, of course, that it was inherited from him—Michael knew that Kathleen Armitage considered her a very clever little dancer. He had been quite sincere in sending his last message to Peggy—had really thought at that time it was better to end the friendship between them—but since then—in spite of his abortive interview with his grandfather—he'd found himself steadily getting back to a healthier and more normal state of mind. What if he *had* spent two years in gaol? He'd nothing to be ashamed of. And if poor Peg were forced to own such a shady little customer as this for a father—who, if he hadn't been in quod, boasted openly that he'd often outwitted the police when operating as an unlicensed starting-price bookmaker—she wouldn't be likely to look down on Michael Deering because he'd been arraigned as a negligent car driver.

When they reached the corner where the road to the town, a mile distant, branched off from the highway, Michael got down from the car and, after thanking his companion for the lift, bade him good-bye.

But he had made up his mind during the last ten minutes that he would see Peggy again. He'd pay his bob, or whatever it was, to secure a seat for the Revue, and endeavour to arrange a meeting with her afterwards. He no longer wished to conceal his real name, nor the details of his arrest and conviction, from either Kathleen or Peggy. It was foolish to have made so much mystery of the whole affair, but while he was with them the wound to his pride had been too new and too raw. He found himself now looking forward to a talk with Peggy

—to the egoistical luxury of discussing his own affairs. He wasn't afraid of boring her by so doing. She'd always shown herself a good little pal while he was at 'Avalon,' in spite of his menial position there. He could see again her sweet, bright smile—could imagine her expressive little face changing as he told his story! Yes, he'd certainly get her to himself somehow, by some means elude this dreadful father of hers.

After strolling on for a few moments Michael retraced his steps and entered the service station on the corner. Here he received permission to dump his swag. The place would be open all night for passing cars, and he could retrieve his property after his interview with Peggy. Lightened of his burden, he set off towards the town.

Getting a cheap seat for the performance was by no means difficult, for the theatre had not been rushed by the townspeople.

The audience, however, was large enough to give some encouragement to the players. Bright and Happy were received with yells of delight. Small as Peggy's part was in the performance, Michael recognized, as Craig had done, that she possessed genuine talent. Make-up and the artificial lights combined to produce in her an illusion of real beauty. But was it an illusion? And was her charm due entirely to the fictitious aids of the stage? Didn't it lie to a great extent in the changing expression of her face? The smile that flashed suddenly as though a light had been kindled within her? In the loveliness of every movement of that perfectly moulded little form?

During the interval Michael made his way round to the stage-door and sent in a note he had scribbled and addressed to 'Miss Peggy Vincent.' In this he told her

that he was in front and wanted to see her, if possible, after the performance; asked if she could manage to get away alone so that they might have a talk together.

For the last time he signed himself 'Maurice Denning.'

Save for his literary work (he smiled to himself at this grandiloquent phrase), he would not use the name again.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW Peggy managed to dispose of her father, Michael didn't ask. All he knew was that she joined him at the stage-door less than ten minutes after the curtain fell, and moved off by his side along the deserted pavement. Whatever the girl's private feelings might have been, there wasn't a trace of awkwardness in her greeting. She seemed to accept it as the most natural thing in the world that chance should bring them together in this fashion.

It was a clear starlit night, and the still air was mild and soft.

"Lovely for a walk," said Peggy. "It was so stuffy in the theatre."

"But don't you want supper or something?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather walk for a bit, if you don't mind. It isn't far back to the main highway, and then we're in the real country. I love the mountains."

The brick building of the small-arms arsenal and the shops and dwellings of the somewhat dreary little town were left behind them, and soon they reached the garage where Michael's swag was deposited. Across the road, beyond a straggling hawthorn hedge, a long grassed slope led down to the woollen mill in the further valley. All about them now were the bushed hills, whose crests against the wide starry sky gave the impression of an aloof and age-old loneliness. Little more than one hundred years had passed since first these hills had seen the advent of the white explorers.

"There's a turnstile through the hedge further on," said Peggy. "It's on a path leading to the mill. We could sit down in the paddock there. I want to hear all your news."

Here was the opening Michael had desired. They moved onwards towards the gap in the hedge, and as they went Michael told his story. Peggy was undoubtedly the ideal listener. Her little exclamations, her eager questions, helped on his narrative. He spoke of his boyhood at Koolandra, his mother, and his return to Australia; gave her an account of the events leading up to his arrest, trial, and imprisonment, and his two interviews with his cousin Moreton Roberts. It was only when he came to Kathleen Armitage, and the days at 'Avalon,' that he was aware of a queer hesitation in his recital. Apparently it was obvious also to the girl walking by his side, for after a moment she remarked, in a flat little voice: "Of course you fell for her. You couldn't help it."

"Fell for her!" he repeated testily. "Don't you girls ever think of anything else but such sentimental tosh?"

"Girls aren't the only people who think of . . . of love," she replied. "Oh, of course I know it's considered sloppy nowadays to admit that there *is* such a thing. We're all expected to be thoroughly hard-boiled. Only our grandmothers and our grandfathers had courage enough to own up to being soft."

"My grandfather obviously hasn't that sort of courage," put in Michael grimly. "But don't talk rot about Mrs. Armitage. She's old enough to be . . ."

"Your mother? She isn't. And she'll never be old. She'll always be young and lovely. Go on with your story. When you set out to see your grandfather, what then?"

"Yes, but get that absurd idea about Kathleen Armistage out of your head."

"Very well," said Peggy. With a quick, comical little gesture she pulled off her beret and shook her head violently. "There! It's out now. Go on."

So Michael once more continued his saga. The factories, the coal mines, the railway workshops and all the wooden buildings of the little mountain town were hidden from them as they passed down the slope beyond the hawthorn hedge. A late moon was rising, showing up more clearly the outlines of the eternal hills and lighting faintly a row of gum trees standing erect and still beside a small dry water-course.

"Let's sit down," said Peggy, as they came within the shadow of the gums. "I don't suppose there are any snakes about."

From a further hollow came the croaking of frogs to mingle with the sound of the crickets in the grass.

"I've tired you," said Michael contritely. "I didn't know we'd come so far. After all that dancing . . ."

"Dancing doesn't tire me. I love it."

"You dance as though you do. You're terribly good, you know."

"Oh, did you like it?" In the light of the newly-risen moon he saw again the eager flash of her smile.

"I liked *you*. And I thought the two comedians—what were their names—Glad and Happy—were very clever."

"Bright and Happy. Yes, they are. They'd get a chance at the 'Variety' if they could find a new act to do. But never mind the show. You haven't finished. After the Tresscotts, what happened?" She had seated herself on the edge of the bank, and Michael threw himself down on the dried gum leaves beside her.

The account of his interview with his grandfather followed. Peggy's indignation was unbounded. Strange how comforting Michael found her complete faith in him. And her delight when he revealed the fact that an article he had written was about to appear in print gave him such a glow of self-satisfaction that he went on to tell her of his ambition to write a real book—a novel of early days in Australia. It might not be very good, and probably would never find a publisher. Still, he was determined to try his hand at it—had already a rough idea of what he meant to do.

Peggy wouldn't listen to any faint-hearted doubts as to his ultimate success. He was *bound* to succeed. But her practical little mind was busy with the problem of his immediate future. Quite apart from the question of establishing his innocence—and that most certainly would have to be done somehow—he must earn enough to keep himself in bread and butter while writing his book. And his employment mustn't be so exacting as to preclude all likelihood of his having sufficient spare time to devote to his literary work.

He laughed at her eager canvassing of the matter. To obtain employment at all wasn't easy. He wouldn't be able to pick and choose his means of livelihood.

Suddenly Peggy had an inspiration. "Why not write a comedy sketch for Bright and Happy and me? I'll be back at 'Avalon' next week and looking for work. It would be a godsend to me if you'd do it."

Michael, with a quick feeling of compunction, realized that he'd been so engrossed in his own hard-luck story that he'd lost sight of the fact that the little girl beside him had her own battles to fight. He knew how much she'd hoped for from this engagement, and now it was at an end. "I wish to heaven I could," he

said soberly. "And not altogether for my own sake. For yours too."

"But of *course* you can if you put your mind to it. Didn't you tell me that you'd written verses and things when you were at Cambridge?"

"But this would be very different. To write anything that could be publicly performed—a real play—that's not quite so easy as you seem to think."

"I didn't say it was easy. I only said I knew you could do it. And, after all, it isn't a real *play*. It's just the *idea* that's wanted. A little dialogue to string some numbers together and some topical verses for the songs."

"But who'd compose the music for the songs?"

"Harry Brooks—Cora Lascelles' husband. He's done nearly all the music for this show, and he composed an awfully good number for the three of us, but it wasn't used. Bright and Happy have millions of their own gags, but the 'Variety' management won't have them in their old act. They want something new. I don't say you'd make a terrific lot of money out of it, but it would be enough to keep you for a few weeks, anyhow."

"It sounds all right," said Michael sarcastically. "But even if I could manage to put something together, don't you realize, you poor deluded child, that it's about a hundred to one no one would look at it?"

"I could *shake* you," said Peggy in a tone of furious disgust. "You won't even *try* to earn your living."

Michael laughed, and instantly Peggy's face cleared. "You will, won't you?" she coaxed. "Think what it would mean to me to have another engagement."

"I'm afraid anything I write won't procure you much of an engagement. But I'll have a shot at it."

"Hurrah!" Without a second's pause Peggy began to rattle off details for the immediate realization of her

plan. She'd arrange an interview for him with Bright and Happy in the morning. Then they'd see Harry Brooks, and after that . . .

"Half a minute," said Michael. "I can't see any of these people without having some sort of idea in my head as to what sort of proposition I've got to put to them. I might never be able to deliver the goods."

"Oh, *don't* be silly," retorted Peggy in the long-suffering tone often adopted by grown-up people to an argumentative child. "Of *course* you'll have a proposition to put to them. We're going to think of one now."

"I see. You're going to write the sketch, then?"

"No," she returned, nodding shrewdly. "But I'm going to jolly well help you to do it." And she forthwith proceeded to outline to the budding dramatist the exact needs of Bright and Happy, and, in a smaller degree, of herself.

As she rattled on Michael raised himself from his recumbent position, sat up with hands round knees, and listened. All that she said was helpful. She was supplying him with the frame—the scaffolding, as it were—of the edifice which was to be erected. She couldn't build the house herself—couldn't even design it—but she could show him within what limits he must construct it. The exact time the sketch must take, the sort of songs and dances required, the necessity of making her own part a very subsidiary one. Bright and Happy wouldn't tolerate a third person being given a 'fat' part.

There wasn't a word of hers that wasn't helpful. Michael felt that in a few minutes he had been provided with a great many most valuable hints on stage-craft. And, more than this, his own brain was being stimulated—his interest aroused.

Her suggestions, however, that he should make the two knockabout comedians brokers' men or plumbers he dismissed as being too hackneyed. He was beginning to get the glimmering of an idea. Beginning to see Bright and Happy as a pair of down-and-out candidates for Parliament—politics were always a fruitful source of amusement in this country—or political agitators. Peggy could be a small girl, munching an apple—their only audience. Or, rather, she could be their only flesh-and-blood audience, with a few cut-out canvas heads appearing against the backcloth—heads that could be mechanically worked at different points during the musical numbers. That device, of course, had been used before, but a few old stage tricks could always be repeated with advantage.

Suggestion, discussion, and argument between them followed, but at length Michael and Peggy had the sketch roughed out. The dialogue and topical verses for the songs remained to be written.

Suddenly Michael sprang to his feet. The moon was high over the low hills. Dawn could not be far away.

"Good Heavens! I'd no idea we'd been here so long," he exclaimed. "I'm terribly sorry, Peg, my dear."

"You needn't be."

"But you ought to have been in bed ages ago. And what will people think?"

"There are no people to think," she answered brusquely. "My landlady doesn't lock the front door. I go home when I please."

"Well, you'll go home now—this instant. Come on!" He stretched out his hand, grasped one of hers, and pulled her to her feet.

"And where are you sleeping?" she asked.

"Here," he answered. "I'll see you home, and then

collect my swag from the garage along the road and get a few hours' sleep under this very tree."

"You needn't see me home."

"Don't be absurd."

"But I'm quite used to seeing myself home."

"Not at this hour of the morning. Come on, child, and don't argue."

"Very well." Peggy stepped out beside him. He might have been speaking to his younger brother, she reflected, and a sudden surge of passionate resentment rose within her. As quickly as it rose, however, she fought it down. If she couldn't be anything else to him, she'd be a good comrade. She'd get his sketch accepted—not for her own sake, for she had a shrewd suspicion that Bright and Happy might object to her inclusion in the cast, and, if so, she'd insist on Michael cutting her out—and she'd work with all her might to find some means of clearing his name. On that she was definitely resolved.

CHAPTER XVII

NEITHER Mr. Bright nor Mr. Happy were very early risers, and Peggy had consequently decided that the interview with Michael and herself should take place about midday. She would see to it that a message reached the comedians as soon as they were called for breakfast, and she hoped that they would at least put in an appearance to hear what she had to say about a possible new act for themselves.

Michael was to meet her half an hour before the appointed time, but meanwhile the little dancer had much to do.

In the first place she intended to make it clear to her father that unless he was prepared to fall in with her suggestions he could hope for no financial assistance in future from her.

He had been in her dressing-room on the previous evening when Michael's note was brought to her. Probably he imagined her assignation to be with some moneyed admirer, thought Peggy with a little bitter smile, for he assented quite amiably to a postponement of their discussion, and pocketing the five shillings which she handed out to him, took himself off.

After she had parted with Michael in the early hours of the dawn Peggy had slept little. Her mind was working feverishly, her thoughts not so much concerned with the proposed comedy act for Bright and Happy as with the problem of Michael's rehabilitation.

Somehow one at least of those three people who could prove his innocence must be found. Every detail of his

story had been memorized meticulously by her quick little brain.

The Korala might seek to justify itself by the title of 'Road House,' but it was near enough to the city to be the rendezvous of many shady characters, and though not of such a questionable type as the Three Blind Mice cabaret in town, was still considered somewhat akin to it.

Peggy was aware that there were few places of doubtful reputation unknown to her father. Would it be possible to utilize this knowledge of his on Michael's behalf? Peggy had a shrewd suspicion that the man and the girl whom young Deering had noticed on the verandah, and who were witnesses of all that happened, had their own reasons for not wishing to come forward to give evidence. Of course, there was the possibility that they never realized the wrong man had been arrested. Or again, they might not even have heard of the case, for the actual smash had occurred at some little distance from the road-house. At any rate, obviously the first thing to be done was to identify them, and in this connection Peggy had a faint hope that her father's services might be of use.

Seated in the corridor outside the bar of the dingy little pub at which Mr. Vincent had spent the previous night, Peggy rapidly explained to him the facts of the case, and announced that though she was still determined to hold tight to her own money, she would pledge herself to do her utmost in the future to reimburse him for his trouble should he be successful in his quest on behalf of young Deering.

Mr. Vincent was inclined to be a little sulky at her refusal to grant him an immediate loan, and extremely sceptical as to his chances of finding out anything

connected with a case which had been settled more than two years previously.

"What's this young blackguard to you, anyhow?" he enquired blusteringly.

"Nothing," answered Peggy. "Except, of course, a friend. And he's not a blackguard. I met him in Sydney before I joined this company."

"Could he pay me if I managed to get information?"

"Oh, I'm sure he could," said Peggy, with more hope than conviction.

"Then I'd better see him for myself and come to a definite arrangement."

"No," returned Peggy firmly. "He wouldn't be likely to realize, as I do, that you'd be any help to him. He'd far rather spend his money on private enquiry agencies."

"Then what the hell's the use of talking to me about it?"

"Don't you see, Dad, if you *do* discover any clue to the identity of these people, I'll guarantee you get well paid for it. I'll never give you a bean of anything I earn in the future if you don't promise to do what you can."

"But what *can* I do? Looking for a needle in a haystack would be an easy job compared to this fool's errand you want to send me on."

"Not at all," returned Peggy. "You know all the people who run these places. They'd talk to you—tell you things they wouldn't be likely to mention to the police."

"And do you suppose that a night-club proprietor knows everyone who patronizes his place? Even if he did, he wouldn't be likely to remember as far back as—how long was it? getting on for three years, didn't you say?"

"But, Dad, you're so clever. You might just light on

some clue. Do promise me you'll help. After all, it won't cost you anything. Visiting the Korala, and nosing round a bit."

"Oh, won't it?" replied Mr. Vincent. "Who pays for my drinks?"

"I'll give you a pound for those, if you'll promise."

"*That* wouldn't go far."

"But it would be a start, and there'd be more to follow if you could discover anything at all."

Mr. Vincent appeared to consider this, and Peggy went on hurriedly: "Mitchell used to run the Korala, didn't he? He might remember one person who was there that night—one of your pals—and he—or she—might be able to remember someone else. It's a sort of chain. First one link and then another. You've only got to ask questions."

"Hand over the quid, then," said Mr. Vincent grudgingly. "I must push off. Got to be back in town early. Rose Hill tomorrow."

"Races?"

He nodded. "I know a little mare who'll pay a whacking big divie. Worth your while to hand out a fiver for me to invest."

"I haven't got a fiver," returned Peggy. "I thought you'd given up backing. Last time I saw you, you were a starting-price . . ."

"Don't talk so loud," put in the little man in a hurried whisper. "Do you want to get me into trouble? I'm an ordinary punter, that's what I am. Anyone has a right to put a quid or two on the tote, I suppose?"

"If they've got it," replied Peggy dryly. "But don't put on that quid I've just given you. It's to be used for a definite purpose."

"I'll use it to the best advantage."

"And you *will* try to find out something, won't you, Dad? You'll get no more unless you do, you know."

"No need to use that hectoring tone, my girl," returned the little man with a grand air. "You can trust me."

But that was just what she couldn't do, thought Peggy ruefully. However, there was a hundred-to-one chance that perhaps her pound note would bring in some return. Her father—once on the trail, and with the prospect of further payments in view—might possibly discover information valuable to Michael.

"I'll phone you next week," remarked Vincent, as Peggy rose to leave him. "Same old address, I suppose? Can't think why you choose to live at that dull old boarding-house. Why don't you take a little flat?"

"Because I'm not one," retorted Peggy quickly.

"What?"

"A little flat. I know when I'm in luck. Mrs. Armitage is the one person in the world who never fails me."

"You seem to forget your father, my dear. Well, I'll shove off. Got to see a man along the street before I go."

Peggy knew who the man would be. He'd be standing behind a bar. Some of her hard-earned 'quid' would be passed over to him. She had few illusions regarding her father.

She watched him as he stepped jauntily along the verandahed pavement. Shabby, shoddy, self-assured. Other girls had fathers they could be proud of! It wasn't fair! Thank goodness Michael didn't know him—never would know him, if she could help it. And with this thought of Michael came the young man himself, walking across the sun-baked street in her direction. He and her father would pass one another.

Suddenly Peggy's eyes widened in amazement and

dismay. The two men had come abreast of one another and had halted. They were talking together! Then, as they parted, Peggy heard her father call: "If you change your mind about a quid or two on that little mare for Rose Hill . . ." and she saw Deering shake his head, smiling, and walk on.

A moment later he caught sight of her, and his face lit up with a different sort of smile—a smile of glad recognition. Peggy knew that her heart melted within her as she met this friendly glance. Furiously she took herself to task for her utter folly. She was nothing to him—never would be anything—and fervently she prayed that he might always remain in ignorance of her feeling for him.

"Hello!" he called gaily. "I didn't expect to meet you out so early."

"It's not so very early," she countered. "Very nearly time for our appointment."

"Ah, but I expected you to be late for that."

"Why?"

"Women always are."

"Not women who've been trained for the stage," she answered. "The curtain doesn't wait for anyone."

He had fallen into step beside her, and together they passed down the street. "You look as fresh as a daisy," he said. "Sleep well?"

"Grandly," she replied, lying gallantly. Not for the world would she let him know that thoughts of him had kept her wide-eyed until the sun was high in the clear blue sky.

"Hot, isn't it? Summer is a comin' in with a vengeance."

"I like the summer—at the beginning. One gets a bit washed out before the end of it." Suddenly she made

up her mind to clear her conscience of what was troubling her. "Did you know that was my father you were talking to just now?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She stopped, regarding him in astonishment. "*How* did you know?"

"He gave me a lift yesterday. He told me you were here. That's why I came along to the show last night."

"Did you tell him anything about yourself—your name—that you knew me?"

"No. He didn't ask my name, and as a matter of fact he thought I'd gone on towards Katomba. He was surprised to see me here, but I told him I'd stayed on because I'd heard of something that might lead to a job. I wonder if it will. I didn't sleep much under that tree. I was too busy thinking out our play."

"Oh, have you settled anything in your mind about it?" Peggy was conscious of relief that the awkward subject of her father had been so easily disposed of. And his admission that he had stayed on in this town merely to see her was cheering in spite of his confession that all he'd thought of after bidding her good-bye was the proposed comedy act.

"I've practically written the thing," he said. "I got out pencil and paper about five this morning and made a rough draft."

"How *marvellous!*" Peggy's eyes were alight with enthusiasm.

"You mayn't think it quite so marvellous when you hear it," he warned her; but it was perfectly obvious that, like most young authors during the first strong after-glow of creative work, he was extremely pleased with himself and longing to read his literary effort aloud to a sympathetic listener. He had not yet learned that

too often, when the glow has faded, and when the work is viewed dispassionately, virtue seems, in some queer fashion, to have passed out of the written word, leaving it dull and lifeless.

"We can sit in the lounge of the hotel where we're to meet Bright and Happy. There won't be anyone there at this hour. I'm dying to hear it."

Strangely enough—though to the proud author this was by no means strange, but only what was to be expected—Peggy, when she heard the little play, and listened to some of the topical verses, was enchanted. "It's *frightfully* clever!" she exclaimed. "But you'll have to cut out some of my lines. They're far too good. Bright and Happy must have all the fat."

"I won't cut a line!" said Michael, now completely the successful dramatist insisting on his rights.

Yet, by degrees, Peggy persuaded him of the wisdom of her counsel. The good lines needn't be lost. They could be transferred to one of the other characters, and gradually bits of stage business, odd lines here and there which added greatly to the value of the act, crept into the script.

Both the little dancer and the author seemed quite unaware that most of the brightest of these additions were due to Peggy's practical experience of the stage. Peggy herself would have been the first to disclaim any credit for them.

"Bright and Happy will be perfect fools if they turn it down," she exclaimed, and in her excitement spoke more loudly than she realized, for Mr. Bright's unkempt head appeared round the angle of the door, and Mr. Bright's raucous voice enquired, "Who's taking my name in vain?"

"I am," said Peggy. "No, not in vain. Come on! It's

nearly twelve, and here's the author complete with sketch. Where's Happy?"

"Gone out to get a shave." He rubbed his chin. "Seems like I need one too."

Mr. Bright was undoubtedly right. He very definitely needed a shave.

Michael folded up the loose sheets of his manuscript with an offended frown. Knowing nothing of the haphazard way of stage-folk, he took this failure to remember an appointment as a sign that they were completely uninterested in his work. But Peggy, aware that however anxious artistes or managers might be to procure good material for themselves, they seldom went to much trouble in their search for it, saved the situation by remarking: "I like you best in your last night's beard, Bright. Come and sit down and listen to something good."

Thus cajoled, Mr. Bright took up his position close beside the little dancer on the leather-covered settee. Michael's frown deepened. Damn cheek the way this dirty, unshaven bounder leant familiarly against Peggy! However, if she didn't mind, it wasn't his business!

Suddenly he was aware that Peggy was kicking him gently under the table. He looked up and caught a little warning contraction of her brows and a nod towards the written sheets he held. In that expressive glance she manage to convey to him that he must get on with the business in hand and pay no attention to Mr. Bright's manners—or lack of them. "Mr. Deer . . . Denning's going to read you the act now," she said "It's no good waiting for Happy. He may be ages. Go on, Michael."

Thus enjoined, Michael, rather haughtily, unfolded again the closely-written sheets of paper. Rapidly Peggy

gave Bright a description of the scene and of the three characters.

"Oh, ho! So you're in it too, are you?" said Bright.

"Mine's only a tiny part, and we could introduce that dance we rehearsed together."

"H'm," said Bright. "Make the act a bit more expensive having three in it."

"You can ask more for three."

"Don't know so much about that."

Out of the corner of her eye Peggy saw that Michael was again getting restive. "Oh, there's Mr. Brooks. Mr. Brooks, come and listen to a new sketch. Music by Harry Brooks."

"Who says so?" asked Bright.

"You do," returned Peggy, "and so will Happy when he hears it."

The musical director, who had entered the lounge, advanced slowly towards the little group. He was a decidedly saturnine-looking individual, but was, in Michael's estimation, decidedly preferable to the comedian. At least he appeared to be clean, well-brushed, and intelligent. On Bright's invitation to 'take a pew,' he sat down beside them.

"Go on, Michael," said Peggy brightly, giving the author another kick under the table—not such a gentle kick this time.

So Michael, with a somewhat bad grace, began to read. Gradually, however, he forgot his annoyance as he visualized the two comedians and Peggy in his little play.

"H'm," said Bright again, when he had finished. "Not much in it, is there? What do you think, Harry."

"I think it's damn good."

Michael shot him a grateful glance, and Peggy's eyes shone.

"I'm not saying we couldn't make it go," went on Bright. "We can put anything over with our own patter and our dances. But we'd have a hell of a lot of work to do anything with that sort of stuff. Give us the script, and I'll let Happy have a look at it when he comes in."

Again Michael caught a warning glance from Peggy.

"Mr. Denning couldn't possibly show it to anyone until he's had it typed. No one could make head or tail of it as it is, could they, Michael?" Her eyes had said, "You're not to part with it," as plainly as if she had spoken.

"Well, please yourself. I don't suppose it'd be much use to us. Too la-di-da and highbrow." He rose. "Have a drink?"

"No, thanks," said Michael shortly.

"Harry?"

The musical director nodded, and the two men, after casually bidding Michael good-bye, left the lounge.

"So that's that!" snapped Michael. He held the folded sheets together and was about to tear them across when Peggy snatched them from him.

"Don't be so idiotic," she said. "Bright *likes* it. I'm certain he does."

"Who cares whether he likes it or not? Ignorant, unwashed brute."

"I care whether he likes it. And I want to play that part."

"Then I'm afraid you're likely to be disappointed." He rose. "I'm sorry, Peggy. I apologize for losing my temper, but that red-faced bounder, sitting there with his arm round you . . ."

"It wasn't round me. It was just resting on my shoulder. Where are you going?"

"To collect my swag. I must get on my way."

"To the Tresscotts?"

"Yes."

"And this?" She indicated the loose sheets of paper in her hand.

"Throw it in the fire."

"There isn't any fire. Oh, don't be so silly, Michael. They always go on like that—pretending it isn't a bit of good. And if you'd given Bright the script he'd probably have cribbed it."

Michael laughed unpleasantly. "Nice friends you have."

"They aren't exactly friends, but they're not at all bad sorts—Bright and Happy."

"I haven't the pleasure of Mr. Happy's acquaintance, but if he's anything like Mr. Bright . . ."

"Michael!" She was standing facing him, her pretty, troubled eyes gazing at him fixedly. "Don't be so intolerant. Those men are the sort of people I have to work with. I don't say I'm very fond of them, but they're much the same class as I am. You've seen my father . . ."

"Peggy, don't!" Michael's tone was full of contrition. "You know quite well that unshaven bounder Bright—or Happy, or whatever his damn name is—isn't fit to black your dear little boots."

"I don't wear boots," said Peggy. "And if I did they'd certainly not be dear. I'm not an expensive little creature."

Michael laughed. "Shoes, then. But it's no good, Peg, my child. I dare say the damn blighter was right and the play's a dud. I was a fool to lose my temper. It

wasn't so much what he said about my writing. It was . . . oh, I don't know—the man himself."

"There you go again—intolerant. Poor Bright never had your advantages . . ."

He gave a sudden short laugh. "My advantages? I don't suppose he's had two years in gaol certainly. . . ."

"Be quiet!" Peggy stamped her little foot. "How can you who've endured so much behave now like a spoilt child? You're going on just like you did when I first met you—all on edge—resentful of everything. And you told me that Mrs. Armitage had made you see things differently!"

The introduction of Kathleen's name had a queerly quietening effect upon him. "So she did." He smiled at her. "This has been just a slight relapse. Overlook it. I suppose I was a bit strung up. No sleep last night. And perhaps I counted on that fool thing of mine being accepted."

"It *will* be accepted."

Michael laughed, more naturally now. "Thank you for your faith, Peggy. I'll make you a present of it, anyhow. Not a very valuable present, I'm afraid, but at least a souvenir of a rather ill-tempered friend."

"If he's a friend, I don't mind his being ill-tempered occasionally."

"That's nice of you. Send me a line to the Tresscotts. Here! Give me that damn thing and I'll write my address on it."

"You won't tear it up?" said Peggy, holding it away from him. "You'll give it back to me?"

"Yes, you can trust me this time," returned Michael, showing now something of the gaiety with which he had greeted her an hour ago. "There you are! Send me a line and tell me news of 'Avalon.'"

She had been on the point of suggesting that she should walk for a little way along the road with him, but his last words, "Tell me news of 'Avalon,'" killed the impulse.

She wouldn't force her society upon him. He didn't really want her company. He had only been anxious to see her in order to hear of Kathleen Armitage.

CHAPTER XVIII

PEGGY had been back at 'Avalon' a week before her father telephoned to her. His message, however, was merely to tell her that though he had gone to a great deal of trouble in the matter she'd discussed with him, he had been unable to discover anything bearing on the affair. He'd spent, not only his valuable time, but also a great deal of money over and above the meagre sum she'd supplied. If she wanted him to continue with his enquiries she'd better send him a further—and larger donation.

After this conversation Peggy decided that she'd thrown away a perfectly good pound note to no purpose. Nothing was to be gained by paying more to Mr. Vincent.

But if she was disappointed at this negative result in her first vicarious effort at detective work, she was overjoyed at her success as a literary agent. She had 'placed' Michael's comedy act with Bright and Happy. Brooks had already supplied two good numbers, which, with the dance that had not been used in *Southern Belles*, constituted the musical score, and the sketch would be produced for a trial week in a fortnight's time.

Whether Michael would ever recognize his own work when he saw it performed was extremely doubtful. Every line in Peggy's part had been cut out, so that although she danced in the one number with the comedians, they were not compelled by the award to pay her for a speaking part. Peggy herself wasn't really disappointed at this. She hadn't expected more. The im-

portant thing was to get the sketch put on and to secure something for it on Michael's behalf.

After much haggling Mr. Bright and Mr. Happy had agreed to pay the author a small sum for the trial week on the understanding that if they found the sketch satisfactory they would buy it outright for twenty pounds.

Peggy was wise enough to have the agreement legally drawn up. The two comedians shouldn't be given the smallest chance of defrauding Michael. Not that they would imagine they were defrauding anyone in stealing ideas. 'Gags' and 'business' were fair game for those who could use them. They were so used to purloining items of this sort that they had no compunction in doing so. 'Copyright' was a word they didn't understand. Peggy, however, was at some pains to explain it to them.

Much as she wished to see Michael again, she was glad that his work with the Tresscotts was likely to keep him in the country until rehearsals were over. He was due to return to the city the day before the production took place. At his request Peggy had found a furnished room for him in a cheap neighbourhood, and she had promised to secure a seat for him for the first night.

If he felt annoyed at the alterations in his little comedy it would be too late to make any fuss about it. She had prepared him for certain changes, but had reminded him that he had presented the sketch to her and told her to do what she liked with it.

In his letters to her he expressed his gratitude for all she had accomplished on his behalf, but Peggy, having had one experience of his touchiness as an author, felt it was quite probable that he might resent the liberties which had been taken with his work.

He would not understand that though many 'cuts' had been made and other material added, the ground-work was his, and that Bright and Happy could not have secured this engagement had he not given them a good little comedy sketch to work on.

Kathleen Armitage, of course, had been apprised of all that had taken place concerning Michael's first effort as a dramatist, and was almost as anxious as Peggy for his success. Not quite as anxious; Peggy quickly realized that fact, for whatever Michael's feelings might be for Mrs. Armitage, the latter obviously regarded him in much the same light as she looked upon her son John. Naturally not with such deep love and tenderness, but with a genuinely maternal interest in his welfare. Whereas an interest in his welfare was by no means all that Peggy felt, though at least a dozen times a day she assured herself that she'd completely recovered from her attack of sloppy sentimentalism, and now wished for nothing more from him than friendship.

Michael's first article had already appeared in the literary page of one of the morning papers, but as it was merely signed with his initials, no one at 'Avalon'—except Peggy and Kathleen—had the least idea that Maurice the waiter was responsible for it. Kathleen had been a little amused to see Miss Hobhouse reading it with apparent interest. This lady had once or twice endeavoured to pump Kathleen further with regard to the young man who had so mysteriously vanished; and Charlie Moss had on various occasions regretted his departure, remarking that he was 'a good chap, whatever he'd been juggled for.' Beyond these few desultory comments no one displayed much curiosity as to what had become of the young man.

Michael himself was happy in his return to the Tress-

cotts. They received him as kindly as before, and he resolved very soon after his arrival to acquaint them with the fact that he had served two years in gaol, and to ask them if—knowing him to be a released prisoner—they wished him to remain on at the poultry farm.

It wasn't altogether easy to make his humiliating confession, but as he stumbled through it he reflected quickly that a few months previously it would have been quite impossible for him to have spoken of his imprisonment at all.

To his relief they were entirely unperturbed by his statement, Mrs. Tresscott remarking that she'd always felt convinced he'd been involved in a spot of bother somewhere, and was delighted to learn that it was of so little importance—except, of course, for the unlucky person who'd met his death thereby.

"Even if you'd been guilty of causing the accident," she observed calmly, "it amounted to nothing more than negligence. If all the rottenly careless and reckless drivers in this State were sentenced to imprisonment, the Government would be hard put to it to find gaols big enough to hold them."

"But I was neither careless nor reckless," put in Michael.

"I'm not saying that you were. I'm only expressing my opinion of others here." And again she was embarked upon her usual diatribe concerning Australia and all things Australian.

To have the bitter humiliations he'd endured dismissed so lightly was a new experience to Michael. At the same time it was a salutary one, for though neither Mrs. Tresscott nor her husband, he reflected somewhat grimly, could have the least idea of what suffering two years in gaol really entailed, nor the stigma that must

inevitably remain to anyone who had served a sentence in prison, yet they did make him realize that he was not likely to be looked upon by everyone as a pariah and an outcast.

Their genuine kindness, and the friendly attitude they had adopted towards him from the first, was not changed in the least by the revelation of his secret. At the same time, Michael was by no means anxious to meet again any of the gay young people, or their parents, at whose houses he'd once dined and danced. After his discharge—before finding sanctuary at 'Avalon'—he'd lived in dread of encountering these former acquaintances. On several occasions he'd been forced to dodge down a side-street to avoid meeting people who must inevitably recognize him—or who might possibly refuse to recognize him.

Well, he wasn't very likely to run across any of them in the vicinity of his humble lodging, he decided, and was thankful to Peggy, when he reached the place, for having chosen so wisely and so well.

It was a fairly large back room, overlooking a narrow strip of garden; and though the exterior of the house—one of a row of dingy dwellings—was unpromising, even little Jim's cottage couldn't have rivalled the interior for its neatness and cleanliness.

A letter from Peggy herself was awaiting him. In it she enclosed a card which, presented to the business manager of the 'Variety' next evening, would admit two for the performance.

As he read this Michael was seized with a sudden longing to make his way out to the nearest public telephone, ring up Mrs. Armitage, and ask her to accompany him.

A moment's reflection, however, and the impulse died.

What a fool he was—and rather a presumptuous fool—to entertain such an idea even for a moment. Kathleen had been kind to him, but that didn't entitle him to any claim upon her. A nice thing, indeed, to expect a woman in her position to accept an invitation from one of her ex-servants, and a gaol-bird at that!

With a frown he returned to Peggy's letter. She warned him that he mustn't be too disappointed if the sketch didn't succeed—told him it had been cut about a lot, and if it were a failure he'd be able at least to blame those who'd altered it and not his own work—and ended by asking him to come round to the stage-door fifteen minutes after the act finished, when she'd have had time to change and be free to talk it over with him.

She was a good little pal, he decided, as he folded up the letter. He didn't deserve such kindness from her. She'd gone to no end of trouble on his behalf. Certainly the placing of the sketch gave her at least another week's work and the chance of more in the future, but Michael knew well enough that it wasn't for her own sake that she'd done so much. Finding him this room, for instance! It was just what he needed. The bustling little landlady—a 'pommy' she was, she told him, and by that Michael knew she was an emigrant and not native born—was as clean and neat as her house. She hadn't a bathroom, she announced regretfully, but there was a good shower in the shed out there at the back and with the hot weather at hand he wouldn't be needing warm baths; and there was his table for writing—the young lady had said he was an author—in the window; and the shilling gasmeter and ring in the corner. She cleaned the room herself. She never left that to her gents—yes, she had two other very nice young chaps in the

house—for gents never seemed to have much idea for themselves of keeping rooms clean, and she liked things 'just so,' she did.

All this in a breath she told Michael, who had made an exceedingly good impression by paying his rent for the first week in advance. It was such a moderate sum that, even if his sketch never brought him in more than the first few pounds and he was unable to secure employment, he would be able to remain on here for quite a considerable time.

It was with a feeling of acute nervous excitement that Michael took his seat amongst the crowded and somewhat noisy audience at the 'Variety' next evening. He found that he could pay little attention to the various turns which preceded the appearance of Bright and Happy in a new sketch *Up the Pole*. The announcement on the programme naturally gave no author's name, for which Michael was extremely thankful. *Up the Pole* indeed! So that's what they called it! A stupid attempt at a pun on electioneering, of course. Well, they'd probably made a hash of the whole thing, he decided gloomily.

Applause and laughter greeted Bright and Happy. But what on earth were they doing? They must have decided to produce another sketch! Yet here was Peggy, and now he recognized the outline of his plot and a few lines which undoubtedly were his. These lines got bigger laughs than any of the comedians' gags, and the topical verses of the songs, in which no alteration had been made, obviously delighted the audience.

Somewhat bewildered, Michael followed the course of the hilarious fooling on the stage before him. Peggy, munching her apple, was mounted on a scooter. She hadn't a word to say, certainly, but she had made a

distinct character-study out of the little schoolgirl, and her evolutions on the scooter were unbelievably comic.

What a clever kid, thought Michael, and forgot his irritation and disappointment in watching her. Her dance with the two comedians brought the little show to an end. An end received with shouts of laughter and tumultuous applause.

If that meant anything, *Up the Pole* had scored a distinct success, but Michael was still a trifle dazed and uncertain.

He turned to a fat woman who sat beside him. "Did you think that was amusing?" he asked.

Her sides were still shaking with laughter, and she was wiping her eyes. At his question her laughter subsided, and she regarded him with an embarrassing stare. Then she addressed the man—presumably her husband—who occupied the seat beyond. "Alf, this gent wants to know if Bright and Happy's 'amusing,'" she did her best to mimic Michael's accent.

"Too right they are," returned Alf. "And the little kid too. But Bright and Happy's clever. They can make any tripe go."

Michael subsided. Tripe! So that was the verdict on his first dramatic effort!

He said no more, and the programme continued.

After nearly a quarter of an hour had elapsed he rose and pushed his way past the couple beside him.

"Bit balmy, that chap," he heard the fat woman remark to her husband as he gained the aisle.

At the stage-door Peggy was waiting for him. "Oh, Michael!" she exclaimed. "Wasn't it wonderful? It's an *enormous* success! It'll be here for weeks!"

A fair woman was standing talking to the stage-doorkeeper. She stared at Michael curiously. Peggy,

noticing her for the first time, exclaimed impulsively: "Miss Lascelles, this is Mr. Denning, who wrote the sketch." Then, turning to Michael, went on: "Mr. Brooks, Miss Lascelles' husband, composed the numbers, you know. Aren't they grand?"

Cora Lascelles was still staring fixedly at Michael. "But I know you, don't I? I never forget a face. Wasn't it at . . ." she stopped abruptly, her expression changing.

"Where?" asked Peggy with interest.

"No, I'm confusing Mr. Denning with someone else," returned Cora Lascelles, and then, swinging round to the stage-doorkeeper, she said sharply, "Send up and tell my husband I'm waiting, will you?"

A dim recollection of having seen this woman's face on some previous occasion returned to Michael as he moved at Peggy's side along the narrow alleyway towards the street. "Perhaps I have met her before," he remarked. "Her face seems vaguely familiar to me."

"You saw her in *Southern Belles*," returned Peggy. "She played lead. She looks quite different on the stage though. That's what puzzled you."

"I expect that's it." Michael dismissed all thought of Cora Lascelles. He was arming Peggy across the brightly lighted thoroughfare—the coloured neon signs flashing red, green and blue above them.

"Where are we going?" asked Peggy.

"We've got to celebrate—even if it's only in coffee, Peg. But not the Australia. I might be recognized there. Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Someone I know—or rather used to know."

"That man who stared at us as we crossed? Who was he?"

"Cedric—son to Moreton—my cousin. A foul young

swine. Didn't you see the look he gave me? That's the sort of thing I've got to expect, I suppose."

"Don't think about him. A celebrated author like you shouldn't bother your head about such people. Oh, Michael! You ought to feel *terribly* proud of yourself—writing that sketch!"

Michael's frowning face relaxed and he laughed. "One of the audience told me it was tripe."

"Of all the *cheek* . . ."

"Well, it doesn't matter what it is. You were wonderful, Peg. You made bricks without straw. And you looked the sweetest, funniest kid."

"Oh, Michael!" Her sweet, ardent smile flashed up at him.

"Someday I'll write a *real* part for you, I swear I will."

She gave his arm an ecstatic squeeze. "And you won't forget me when you're famous?"

"Famous or infamous, I'll never forget you and all you've done for me," he answered soberly. "No man could ever find a better little pal."

"You'll let me be that always?"

"If you will, Peggy."

She breathed a quick, faint sight of content. Michael and she seemed nearer in spirit tonight than they had ever been before.

CHAPTER XIX

PEGGY'S prognostication proved correct. *Up the Pole* was a distinct success and remained at the 'Variety' for a month. During this month Michael, seated at the writing-table in the window of his room, worked at high pressure. Often he was reminded of Gissing's story concerning the penniless author whose chief sustenance while feverishly engaged upon the compilation of his novel consisted of artichokes from the old neglected garden. There weren't any artichokes to be seen in the strip of garden before him—only masses of roses, pink, white, and red, clambering over the old grey paling fence.

But fortunately for him the small amount of money he had saved, and the payments from Bright and Happy for the sketch, made him independent of a purely vegetarian diet. Mrs. Smithers, his neat, cheerful little landlady, provided him with a good hot midday meal, and for the rest he managed with his gas-ring. He had set himself definite hours of work and outdoor exercise, and kept rigidly to his schedule. Peggy had indeed chosen well for him in selecting this locality, for less than forty minutes' walk took him to the Mitchell Library for any references he required, while half an hour in an opposite direction brought him out above the grey rocks of Bondi Beach, whose sands now at all hours of the day were thickly populated by the bright-suited figures of enthusiastic surfers. Peggy was almost

always with him on these excursions to Bondi, and he was happier now than he had ever hoped to be, stretched out on the warm sand talking to her of his work, or plunging into the strong Pacific breakers with her beside him.

Mrs. Tresscott's very unfair generalization on Australia and Australians had given him the idea of a further newspaper article. He called it *An Australian Comes Home*, and in it he examined her contention that Australia was a country of hard, bright sunshine, gum trees, red dust, shark-infested beaches, and a few muddy rivers; that its animals were uncouth, and its inhabitants self-satisfied, uncultured, gambling mad, pleasure-loving, and resentful of any criticism.

All this he discussed with Peggy, and found her passionate denials of Mrs. Tresscott's opinions both amusing and helpful in clarifying his own thought.

This article was also accepted and duly paid for, and now, with two contributions in print and a comedy sketch—or part of one—being publicly performed, Michael felt he might justifiably describe himself as a writer.

Kathleen Armitage he had seen only once when she met him in town a day or two after the production of *Up the Pole* and signed for him his Mitchell Library reader's ticket. From Peggy, however, he had news of her and was genuinely distressed to learn that she had been going through an extremely anxious time. John, suddenly hurried away from school to a nursing-home for a mastoid operation, had been very seriously ill indeed.

"The doctors say he ought to be sent up to the mountains or somewhere as soon as he's well enough," said Peggy. "Mrs. Armitage wants to go with him, but

doesn't know how she can leave 'Avalon.' I wish I could help her, but I'll be away too after next week. Not that I'd be much use even if I were here."

"Going away?" Michael looked at her in sudden dismay. They were sitting together in the hot afternoon sunlight on the beach with their wet bathing suits spread out on the warm sand to dry. "Where are you going?"

"To Newcastle. I told you Bright and Happy were taking the sketch north for Christmas."

"Yes, but I hadn't realized . . . How long will you be away?"

"We may go on to Brisbane. It'll be terribly hot there now, I expect. Will you miss me?"

Michael frowned. "Of course I shall." He hadn't been fully aware until this moment how much Peggy's companionship meant to him. The long hours of writing in his room never seemed so lonely when he had these excursions with Peggy to look forward to.

"I wish I'd insisted on Bright and Happy paying you a royalty for this sketch instead of buying it outright," said Peggy now. "They'll probably go on playing it for a year or more. But then I don't suppose they'd have agreed to a royalty."

"And will you be with them for a year?" Michael's frown deepened.

"I'll have to hang on to my job, unless anything else turns up. "There's just a chance . . ."

"Yes?"

"I always think it's a bit unlucky to discuss chances beforehand."

"You've got to discuss everything with me," said Michael autocratically.

"Well, Mr. Craig—he's a friend of Kathleen's—

brought Dantry along to see our show the other night . . ."

"Who the devil's Dantry?"

"He was our producer for *Southern Belles*, and he's a friend of another producer, Blythe."

"Well?"

"Don't snap at me so, Michael."

"I wasn't snapping. Go on."

"Blythe *might* be persuaded to give me a tiny part in a new show—a musical comedy—they're putting on soon."

"You seem to be mixed up with a confounded lot of men."

"What do you mean—mixed up?"

"Don't women ever interest themselves on your behalf?"

"Not in my work. Why should they?"

"It seems queer to me that you should owe all your chances of advancement always to *men*."

"It didn't seem queer to me when you told me it was Mrs. Armitage to whom *you* owed everything."

"That's different."

"I don't see how. You're a man and she's a woman, and she's helped you. I'm a woman—very nearly—and Mr. Craig . . ."

"And Bright and Happy and Dantry and Blythe and God knows how many more."

"One more," said Peggy softly. "Michael Deering."

"H'm," growled Michael. "A fat lot I've done."

"You wrote that little part in the sketch for me. If it hadn't been for that Dantry wouldn't even have *considered* me for this new production."

"Just considering you won't get you very far."

"I know. That's why I don't want to build on it too

much. Just as I don't want you to build on something else."

"What?"

"Well, I've got another bit of news for you, but it mayn't be any more use than the advertisement was."

"I had *one* answer," said Michael bitterly.

"Yes, and the horrid little fraud of a man just tried to get money out of you. He'd never been inside the Korala in his life. This is different, but I don't quite see that it gets us anywhere."

"What is it?"

"I didn't tell you, but I asked Dad to do a spot of sleuthing. He knows Mitchell, who used to run the Korala, and I thought he might find out *someone* who was there that night. Michael, can't you remember *at all* what the man who took your car looked like?"

"I've told you I never saw him clearly. I just caught the gleam of a white shirt-front and he gave a yell that sounded like 'Up there, Saley.'"

"Up there, Gazely?"

"Yes, that's probably it. What does it mean?"

"Gazely was an Australian footballer. It used to be a cry like 'Come on, Steve.'"

"Well, does Mitchell remember any very drunk young man in evening dress who would be likely to call out 'Up there, Gazely' in moments of excitement?"

Peggy shook her head. "There are so many like that—who get drunk and shout things—but there's only one Cora Lascelles."

"Who's she?"

"Harry Brooks' wife. She's going to play lead in the new show that Dantry says Blythe might consider me for."

"Oh, hell, Peggy, keep to the point."

"I *am* keeping to the point. Don't be so impatient. The other day Dad met a man who was talking about Cora, and he mentioned casually that he'd seen her once at the Korala road-house."

"Hundreds of people went to the Korala."

"But don't you remember when you met Cora, she said . . ."

"When did I meet her?"

"Oh, Michael, don't be so stupid and slow. I introduced you to her after our first show—the first night of the sketch. She prides herself on never forgetting a face, and . . ."

Suddenly Michael sat bolt upright. "That woman at the stage-door? Good God, Peggy! I believe it was *she* on the verandah at the Korala."

"Oh, Michael!" Peggy was almost gasping with excitement. "Are you sure?"

"No," said Michael slowly. "I'm not really sure. I couldn't swear to it, but I've a pretty shrewd suspicion she is the same girl."

"But didn't you recognize her as the Korala person when you saw her in *Southern Belles*?"

He shook his head. "She looks so different in her make-up. That night at the stage-door some sort of dim recollection came back to me . . ."

"She was certain she'd seen *you* before. You *must* be right, Michael."

"Even if I am, what good will it do me? Suppose she *is* the girl. Why didn't she come forward long ago? She must have her own reasons for not wanting to recall anything that happened at the road-house. She pretended, don't you remember, after a second that she'd mistaken me for someone else."

"She *pretended*. That *proves* she was the woman," exclaimed Peggy in triumph.

"It doesn't help *me* to prove anything," returned Michael gloomily. "If she doesn't want to say she saw another man go off with my car, we can't make her."

"We can! We must!" Peggy's voice was tense with excitement. "Oh, Michael, how wonderful it will be to show your old grandfather and the whole world that you were telling the truth all along!"

"We'll have to make others tell the truth first," said Michael dryly. "And we're not even absolutely positive that Cora Lascelles is the witness who can clear me."

"I *am*. Positive, positive, *positive*! Oh, now that we've got so far, we can't *fail* to find out everything."

"We've got no further at all," said Michael crossly. "If anything, we're worse off than before. If we've found the missing witness—and I tell you I can't *swear* she's the woman—and the missing witness won't speak, don't you see that my last chance is gone?"

"Michael," said Peggy, eyeing him balefully, "I'd very much like to give you a good hard box on the ears."

For the first time the tension of his stern young face relaxed and he grinned at her. "Go ahead!" he remarked easily. "My ears are much harder than your little hands."

"You don't know how hard my little hand can be," she threatened.

For answer, he picked up the slender, sunburnt hand beside him and raised it to his lips. For a second they were both quite still. Then suddenly Peggy rose. "You've got to finish your tenth chapter tonight," she

announced briskly. "You promised to read it to me tomorrow. And, Michael—I'm not going to argue with you any further over this Cora Lascelles business. I'm going to *act*."

He smiled at her with a sudden fondness. "Well, that's your job, isn't it?" he answered. "And damn well you do it."

CHAPTER XX

NEVER before had Kathleen Armitage found the summer heat so trying. Days of scorching sun and hot winds sweeping across the baked continent from the West—days when every window and door at 'Avalon' had to be hermetically sealed to keep out the heat—alternated with the enervating humidity of the blustering north-easters. They at least brought a certain relief, but the only real alleviation to discomfort was the 'cool change' from the South. The big cone hoisted at the General Post Office heralded this some hours before the cooling breezes actually arrived. Every denizen of the city welcomed this signal with joy, but few this summer looked for it more eagerly than Kathleen.

In the past the hot weather had affected her very little. She loved the long bright days of summer; the glorious panorama of the harbour—white sails of innumerable yachts speeding over the sparkling blue water; and could picture beyond the Heads on either side the miles of ocean beaches where every day and all day surfers—their numbers swelled to tens of thousands on Saturdays and Sundays—disported themselves in the great breakers rolling lazily shoreward from the wide Pacific.

Kathleen herself had no chance of surfing this year. John, still very white and languid, was spending his Christmas holidays at home. Camping and surfing were both alike forbidden to the invalid. It was desperately dull for the poor boy, Kathleen knew, and this knowledge added to the tension of her nerves. The old adage

that troubles never come singly seemed to be well exemplified in her case just now, she reflected wearily. Not only had she undergone the strain of John's illness, but Mrs. Montgomery too had been far from well, and the financial affairs of 'Avalon' were going from bad to worse.

It was quite usual to have rooms empty at Christmas time. So many people spent their holidays away from the city. As a rule Kathleen expected this and was well prepared for it. But this year John's illness, her mother's indisposition, and many other unforeseen expenses had combined to cripple her financially, and now, to cap all, a serious defect had been discovered in the hot-water system at 'Avalon' which would necessitate a large outlay immediately on plumbing.

Why on earth had she ever taken over this old house?

But she'd had to provide for herself and her dependants somehow, and at the time this had seemed the best proposition offering.

No wonder she was finding the summer trying, thought Kathleen, smiling ruefully. If only John were really strong and well again she felt she might face all her other difficulties with a greater courage. But he was so weak and listless, all his buoyant high spirits gone.

Had she been wise in yielding to her mother's arguments and refusing Peter's offer of a sea-trip for her boy? Doubts as to this decision of hers assailed her. The bitter disappointment John had suffered over it might well be retarding his recovery.

She'd not seen Peter since their motor drive together along the coast. The date of the wool sale to which he proposed taking her coincided with one of her busiest periods, and she was forced to decline his invitation.

It was some time after John's operation that he rang

up again, and he abused her roundly for not having let him know of the boy's illness earlier. His offer to take the invalid on a fortnight's cruise with him Kathleen accepted eagerly. It seemed to her to be the very best thing that could be done for her boy. But Mrs. Montgomery from the first had bitterly opposed the idea. It wasn't, she said, so much because she disliked Peter Craig—though she made no secret of the fact that she considered his the worst of influences to which any schoolboy could be subjected—but it was the fact that such a trip would do the boy far more harm than good.

"I've heard about these cruises," she remarked. "A set of wild young people who spend their days and nights drinking and gambling."

Kathleen smiled. "I really don't think John will be inveigled into any cocktail parties or poker games."

"Don't be absurd, Kathleen! You know I wasn't suggesting any such thing. It's merely that on these pleasure trips an invalid gets no attention whatever."

"Peter would look after him."

"Peter Craig isn't going on a holiday cruise with the idea of acting as nurse to a sick boy. No, my dear, even admitting his intentions are good, do you imagine for one instant that John would get the care and consideration—the proper food and rest—on a pleasure ship that he'd get in his own home? You'll be more than foolish, Kathleen, if you consent to this plan. And suppose the boy gets a return of that ear trouble on board, what medical service can he obtain?"

"There's a ship's surgeon."

"Yes, a man who can bandage a twisted ankle or put a dressing on a sunburnt blistered back—that's about all. You've told me before that you don't want my advice,

but I have a feeling that you'll bitterly regret it if you send your boy away from home at the present time."

In the face of this Kathleen's enthusiasm was considerably dampened, and in the end she rang Peter up at his office and told him that on consideration she had decided that it might not be altogether wise to accept his kind offer.

Somehow, when it came to stating her reasons for this refusal, Kathleen was aware that they sounded lame and inadequate, and she did not wonder that Peter's acknowledgment of them was a trifle brusque. Obviously he was hurt by her decision, but the more excuses she made, the feebler they appeared to be. At last, conscious that she had not put her case in the best and most gracious manner possible, Kathleen said good-bye and rang off.

Peggy was still on tour with the sketch, and Kathleen had seen next to nothing of Michael. But she knew that he was not in any immediate need of money and was working hard at his book. The thought that her two protégées were, for the moment at least, engaged in congenial employment and had enough ready cash with which to carry on, provided a little gleam of brightness to her otherwise somewhat dreary outlook.

It was during one of the hottest weeks in January that a diversion occurred which did in a small measure serve to cheer and stimulate her. This was the arrival at 'Avalon' of Mrs. Tresscott. The latter had merely telephoned from the city explaining that she had been told of Mrs. Armitage's guest-house by Michael Deering, and asking if there were any chance of a room being vacant.

Though Mrs. Tresscott would not be in town for more

than a week, Kathleen was only too glad to accommodate her. Every few shillings were of importance nowadays. And, in addition to this, Kathleen looked forward to meeting the woman Michael had spoken of with gratitude and affection.

Mrs. Tresscott, arriving unheralded and unsung, created no sensation whatever at 'Avalon.' In point of fact, Miss Hobhouse showed plainly that she considered the new guest's downright and somewhat forcible method of expressing herself 'bad style,' until one afternoon an announcement in the woman's column of the evening paper set most of the inmates of 'Avalon' in a small ferment of excitement.

Mrs. Tresscott, it appeared, had been lunching at Government House with her cousin, Lady Helen Brodric, wife of the new Governor.

Clara Walsh, intensely excited over this news, immediately rushed up to Kathleen's room, brandishing the paper. "Did *you* know she was related to the Government House people?"

"Yes," said Kathleen, "but I think she'll be rather annoyed at that paragraph." As a matter of fact, Mrs. Tresscott had explained the position to her hostess on her arrival. It appeared that she and her cousin were a great deal more devoted to one another than cousins usually are, and Lady Helen had been hurt by her refusal to stay at Government House. "Naturally I wanted to see something of Nell, but I really couldn't be bothered with all that fuss at Government House. So we compromised. I agreed to abandon the chickens to Guy for a week and stay in town. Then in the intervals of her opening bazaars and attending church fêtes we might manage to secure a few quiet hours together."

These quiet hours would now be sadly interfered with owing to the activities of some pertinacious woman of the Press. One of Mrs. Tresscott's favourite gibes was at the space allocated in the Press to the unimportant doings of unimportant people, and the avidity with which every woman in the city turned first to the 'social gossip' in the papers. That was practically all that they read, she contended. The European news they seldom glanced at. But a photograph of 'Mrs. Jones in her lovely garden at Bellevue Hill,' or 'Mrs. Smith entertaining her friends at a cocktail party at her beautiful residence at Point Piper,' was of absorbing interest.

To this Kathleen replied that she didn't see what difference there was in her countrywomen's interest in local society to the interest displayed by all classes in England in pictures in the *Sketch* or the *Tatler* of 'Lady Highflight's house-party at Castle Lofty.'

Mrs. Tresscott laughed at this. She and Kathleen had from the first been on very friendly terms in spite of occasional arguments, and their liking for one another increased as time went on.

Kathleen did not hesitate to tell her guest that she thought her not only unfair to Australia, but extremely foolish in her attitude. Surely the world would be very dull if every country were an exact replica of another, and the sooner Mrs. Tresscott opened her eyes to the very real beauty of this new land, and the very obvious good points of its inhabitants, the better. "It's extremely easy to find fault," she said. "But why not try a little constructive criticism instead? We're a young country, and we're willing to learn."

"But that's just what I contend you're not."

"So far I haven't heard much that was useful from you," remarked Kathleen amiably. "It's mostly abuse."

Again Mrs. Tresscott laughed. "I'll admit I exaggerate. I work off a little spleen in this fashion. I'm often so desperately homesick, Mrs. Armitage, but I'm not really as rude as I sound."

"I'm glad of that," replied Kathleen calmly. "I like to think our English visitors can provide us with a lesson in good manners occasionally."

"Touché! As Queen Victoria said, 'I will be good.'"

In spite of these candid exchanges of opinion Kathleen found Mrs. Tresscott a very entertaining and agreeable visitor, and she was annoyed to know that the privacy she desired had now been violated.

"But, Kathleen," Clara went on, "I think you might have given me a *hint* about this. You know quite well how I've been worrying at Joan's not being invited to the Government House ball next week. I can't help thinking it's because she accepted that job with those wholesale dress people. I'd never have agreed to her taking it if it hadn't been for you. I feel sure now it was a *mistake*, but perhaps Mrs. Tresscott will be able to arrange that Joan gets her invitation after all. If I'd known *before* that she was Lady Helen's cousin I could have done all sorts of little things for her. Then it would have been quite simple. But I'm afraid I haven't taken much notice of her so far, and if I ask her now . . ."

"Don't do anything so foolish, Clara. What on earth has Mrs. Tresscott got to do with the Government House invitations? You'd only humiliate yourself and Joan by saying anything about it."

"I can't see how you make that out. I always went to the Government House balls when I was a girl—so did you, for that matter—and Joan and I were at the garden party."

"Well, do as you like, Clara, but . . ." She broke off suddenly, her eyes rapidly scanning a few lines in the paper that she held.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Do you mind, Clara—I've got the menus for tonight's dinner to write."

"I'll go. All the same, I mean to ask Mrs. Tresscott about it."

"Very well."

Clara was gone. She hadn't taken her paper with her, and Kathleen was left still staring at the paragraph which had caught her attention.

'A marriage of Australian interest took place in London recently between Sir Oliver Sandison, Bart., and Mrs. A. J. Deans. Mrs. Deans, who has always been an ardent race-goer, will be remembered by many of her fellow sportsmen in Sydney as one of the best-dressed women in the enclosure at Randwick. After a short honeymoon spent on the Continent, Sir Oliver and Lady Sandison will take up their residence at Sir Oliver's charming country home near Torquay.'

Mrs. Deans married! And to an English baronet! Extraordinary that she should make such a good match as this appeared to be!

Yet why extraordinary? Some men undoubtedly found a woman of 'experience' more attractive than the modest violet. She was undeniably handsome, smart and, amongst a certain set, extremely popular.

But what of Peter Craig?

Kathleen was conscious of an overwhelming sensation of pity for her friend. Poor Peter! He hadn't had much luck, either in his legal or his illicit union. Would he be greatly cut up by this announcement? Had he known beforehand that the marriage was likely to take

place? Would he be dreadfully lonely now that this tie was broken?

Well, these were questions Kathleen wasn't likely to have answered, seeing that she could hardly put them to him. After all, how did it concern her? Not at all!

Kathleen laid the paper aside and with it did her best to lay aside also all interest in the paragraph it contained.

Yet she was conscious of a queer surge of conflicting emotions within her, and as she wrote out the dinner menus she knew that the hand which guided her pen was not quite steady.

CHAPTER XXI

CLARA WALSH'S request to Mrs. Tresscott that she would interest herself on Joan's behalf proved fruitless. Quite amiably Lady Helen's cousin explained that she herself was an unimportant poultry farmer and had no knowledge whatever of the official list of guests at Government House. Captain Dysart, she believed, arranged all that. Why not write direct to him?

Clara, however, wasn't intrepid enough to do this. She'd received one snub—pleasantly administered, certainly—she wouldn't risk another.

But after Mrs. Tresscott's departure back to her husband and the chickens Mrs. Walsh informed Kathleen that she failed to understand how anyone could tolerate such a woman. "Rude and stuck-up, *I* call her."

Kathleen laughed. "She's the last person I should describe as 'stuck-up.' I found her most amusing. And I know she's kind-hearted."

"Kind-hearted, indeed! You haven't got any *discrimination*, Kathleen. Personally I think it shows a lack of character to be as easy-going as you are."

"You may be right," agreed Kathleen, unperturbed.

"You just laughed when she said an Australian station-owner once told her that in the drought the cows or sheep were dying like flies. And she said 'keows.'"

Kathleen laughed again. "Well, that's, I suppose, how he *did* say it. And I started that by my story of the Australian talking about a dark horse as 'a fair cow.'"

"I don't see why you should have encouraged her in those silly stories. I didn't see anything very funny in them."

"Didn't you like her first encounter with an Australian milkman? The man who listened to her complaint about something and then airily ended the discussion with: 'Good-o, Mrs. Trespot. Ta-ta.'"

"No, I didn't," returned Clara with a sniff. "I suppose she expected him to bow and scrape and say: 'Very well, Madam, I'll have the mistake rectified. Good-day.' A perfect snob, I call her."

Kathleen, still laughing, denied this. It was no use trying to make Clara understand that she'd enjoyed Mrs. Tresscott's visit; that even the arguments they'd had—which occupied in reality only a fraction of the time they'd spent together—were stimulating and amusing. They'd discussed books and films, music, events of the day, and life in general. Michael's affairs—though Mrs. Tresscott spoke of him with the utmost kindness—had not played a very prominent part in their conversation. It was quite evident to Kathleen that the Tresscotts knew little more about young Deering than that he had been imprisoned. "Damn bad luck for the poor lad," said Mrs. Tresscott. "We liked him no end—were sorry when he left us. But he's promised to come back if we're needing help later."

Kathleen had seen very little of her ex-waiter since his return from the country. But Peggy had seen him, and Peggy obviously now knew far more of his past life and the events leading up to his arrest than Kathleen did. It wasn't hard to guess that Peggy was greatly attracted by the young man, though from what she said it was clear to Kathleen that Michael himself had shown no sign of being aware of the affection bestowed

upon him. Better perhaps if he remained unresponsive, for what chance of ultimate happiness could these two poor young things hope for from any serious attachment? It wasn't possible for them to marry. Love in a cottage wasn't always, and of necessity, a failure; but love without any roof to your head or any certainty of obtaining your next day's crust seemed hazardous, to say the least of it. Certainly Peggy had succeeded in paying off her debt to 'Avalon,' and for the moment Michael was managing to scrape along; but Peggy was shortly to be disengaged again and perhaps it might be months before she secured another job.

It had been a blow to Kathleen—for the child's sake, not for her own, for she would be glad to have her back at 'Avalon'—to learn that Messrs. Bright and Happy had decided to cut out the third part in their sketch and were terminating Peggy's engagement.

When Peggy returned, however, she was in a whirl of excitement and high spirits. She flung herself at Kathleen and hugged her wildly. "I wouldn't write or wire to you about it. I wanted to tell you myself. I've got a part! A real live *part*! In *Dancing Mad*. Only a small one, of course, but that means a better salary than I've ever had. I was *terribly* down in the dumps over it, because rehearsals have been going on for a fortnight, and I'd *hoped* there was a chance for me, and then there wasn't."

"But you say now . . ."

"Yes, that's what so *marvellous*. The girl they'd engaged wasn't any good, and Dantrey—your Mr. Craig brought him to see me in *Up the Pole*—mentioned my name again and I've got it! I've got it! The contract's signed. I rehearse tomorrow and we're opening in ten days' time."

Not only had Peggy secured this small part, but after the first few rehearsals she was informed that she would understudy Cora Lascelles. Not that she'd ever get the chance to play the part, she told Kathleen—Cora was as strong as a horse—but it was lovely fun to study it.

It was impossible now for her to join Michael in his excursions to Bondi beach. All day long, with the exception of a short interval for lunch, the *Dancing Mad* company was kept hard at work in the theatre. But rehearsals were never drudgery to Peggy. She loved the musty smell—varied with the disinfectant used by the cleaners—of the big bare stage, and the cavernous gloom of the holland-draped auditorium; the light from battens and floats falling upon the stacked flats in the scene dock; the noise of carpenters' hammers, and the voices of electricians; the whispering and subdued laughter amongst the crowd gathered on the stage; all the bustle of preparation for the forthcoming production.

Many of the girls in chorus and ballet were old friends of hers. In their neat little black shorts—their practice dresses—they gathered round her in a state of great excitement when she first appeared. This was a very different company to *Southern Belles*—a much more congenial atmosphere.

"Aren't you *lucky*, Peg, getting a part!"

"I saw you in *Up the Pole*. You were a real trick in that."

"Weren't you on tour with a dud show before Christmas?"

"Not so dud. Cora Lascelles was in it too," returned Peggy defensively. "And Bright and Happy."

"But it was an awful flop, wasn't it?"

"How could it help being a flop with a name like that? I ask you! *Southern Belles*. My God!"

"What was Cora like in it? She's going to be pretty punk in this."

"How she goes on getting big parts beats me!"

"Harry Brooks works it for her. He was with you too, wasn't he, Peg? Wrote the music for that Revue, didn't he?"

All their conversation was of 'shows,' past, present, and to come, and the performances given by various artistes. But Peggy never wearied of it. This was the life she was accustomed to.

In spite of her hard work she managed to see something of Michael. He came along sometimes to the stage-door, and they lunched together—a cup of coffee and a sandwich in some small tea-shop usually.

She hadn't made much progress in her rôle of Sherlock Holmes, but, as she explained to Michael, now that she was to be so intimately connected with Cora Lascelles—seeing her every day—she *must* succeed in finding out something.

The part which had been allotted to her was by no means large, but she had a few lines to speak, and one dance—just exhibition ballroom dancing, she explained to Michael—in the cabaret scene. One of her minor worries concerned her partner in this dance. He was a most abominable creature and she detested him.

"I'll never be able to do my best with him," she sighed. "I wish I were going to dance with you, Michael."

They were together in his own shabby room. Michael had invited her to dinner—a dinner cooked by himself (with more than a little help from his kind-hearted landlady) on his own gas-ring.

"How do you know I *can* dance?" enquired Michael.

"I feel it in my bones. I can always tell when I

first see people whether they could dance or not. If they're supple and lithe and move easily—like you—then . . .”

“You're very clever, aren't you? You'd probably find the people you picked out didn't know a single step.”

“It isn't knowing steps, I mean. It's whether they'd dance well if they were taught. But you do dance, don't you?”

“Yes, of course. Just common or garden dances.”

They had finished their somewhat frugal meal. Through the open window from the next door came the sound of radio music—a dance band playing.

Peggy jumped up suddenly and pushed the table aside. “Come on, Michael! That's a tango. Can you do it?”

For answer Michael took her in his arms and swung her into the cleared centre of the room. In this confined space it wasn't the easiest thing in the world to dance a tango, but the two young people made a very good job of it.

“I *knew* you could,” breathed Peggy ecstatically. “Michael, you're simply *divine* to dance with!”

“Marvellous!” jeered Michael. “It's you, not me. You forget I've got a ballerina in my arms.”

“And you smell so nice,” said Peggy.

Michael laughed. “What a terrible remark, Peg. Do you usually tell your partners that?”

“No,” returned Peggy dismally. “I wish I could. That's one of the things that's so sickening about Leyton. He reeks—positively reeks—of stale beer or whisky or gin. It's *foul*. And I don't believe he's ever *heard* of a bathroom.”

The music ceased, and the dancers stopped.

"Look!" said Peggy, breaking away from him. "Can you do this?" She swung round, stepping daintily from one foot to the other.

Michael watched her intently. "Half a jiff! How does it go?"

"That's it!" exclaimed Peggy delightedly. "Now this."

Again he imitated the steps she took. Not so successfully this time, but after a few minutes he had mastered the more intricate movement.

"Michael, you're *wonderful*!"

He grinned at her. He was enjoying his dancing lesson.

For the next half-hour they practised steps together. Then Michael, in sudden contrition, stopped. "A nice thing keeping you at it like this when you've been rehearsing all day."

"But I love it! I could dance for ever! Oh, Michael, *why* aren't you dancing with me in the show instead of that lous—*grisly* Leyton?"

"Don't be abusive, Peggy."

"Abusive? I could call him much worse things than that."

"I've no doubt you could," returned Michael dryly, "but don't."

"I'm not quite your ideal of the perfect little lady, am I, Michael?" said Peggy wistfully. "You'd be shocked at some of the language I use sometimes, I'm afraid."

"I'm not easily shocked."

"No, but you wouldn't like it."

"I like you too well, my dear, to enjoy hearing you use ugly words." That remark sounded decidedly priggish, and Michael hastily added: "Some people can use bad language and get away with it. It just sounds

amusing." He was thinking of Mrs. Tresscott. "But you're too dainty and charming, somehow."

"What you really mean," returned Peggy shrewdly, "is that if you're born in the purple, you can get away with anything. Whereas a little chorus girl . . ." Then seeing that Michael looked hurt, she went on quickly. "All right, Michael. I'll do my best to refrain from using 'ugly words,' as you call them, when I'm with you, at any rate. Oh, but I do *wish* you were going to be in the show—that we could dance together."

Michael laughed shortly. "Thanks. I see myself as a sort of super gigolo daubing my face with grease-paint . . ."

"Oh, no, you don't," put in Peggy swiftly. "Because unfortunately you won't get the chance. I wish you could."

"You may save yourself the trouble of that wish. I've no desire to paint my face and smirk at the audience."

"How dare you insinuate that I smirk!" demanded Peggy fiercely. "You're a hateful, bad-tempered . . ."

Michael laughed outright. "There's the music again. Come on, let's try those new steps."

For a moment Peggy's supple little figure stiffened rigidly. Then her short-lived anger was gone. Her sweet smile flashed up into young Deering's face as she melted into his embrace and glided with him towards the centre of the room.

"I forgive you," she said.

"Thanks," returned Michael casually. But his smile answered hers, and his arms tightened round her.

CHAPTER XXII

“CABARET scene again!” shouted Blythe from the stalls. “Do you think you’re at a Methodist’s Presbyterian funeral, all of you? You’re just about as bloody cheerful. And you, Vincent!”

Peggy stepped forward. Blythe had been quite pleasant to her up to the present, but he was decidedly annoyed now as he told her in words of which Michael would certainly have disapproved his opinion of her performance.

Poor Peggy longed to explain the truth, that her dance was being completely ‘queered’ by Leyton. No use, however, on the stage making excuses or blaming anyone else.

“Vincent and Leyton’s dance!” roared Blythe.

The pianist struck up the music, Peggy came forward, and then there was a pause.

“Leyton!” Blythe’s voice now was more than a roar, it was a bellow. Shouts of “Leyton!” on the stage echoed him, but there was no response. Then the stage-manager stepped down to the footlights. “Leyton thought rehearsal was dismissed for the lunch interval.”

Blythe swore vigorously. His language might well be described now as ‘colourful.’

At last, perforce, the dance was cut, and the scene taken from the beginning. Peggy’s entrance was not due for some minutes. She would have time to rush out to the stage-door to tell Michael, who was waiting to take her out to lunch, that she was likely to be delayed.

As she ran down the echoing brick passageway a brilliant—a daring—idea occurred to her.

In another moment, breathlessly, she was communicating it to Michael.

Somehow now, though it still sounded daring, it didn't sound in the least brilliant. Michael scoffed at it. "How on earth do you imagine I'm to get past this old ogre at the stage-door in the first place?"

"I'll work that."

"No one wants to see *me* dance. Don't be a fool, Peg. You couldn't possibly work it."

"Michael, for my sake! Even if, as you say, they kick you out, wouldn't you just put up with that to do me a good turn? They wouldn't actually *kick* you."

Michael's frowning face relaxed into a smile. "But what earthly use would it be? To you, I mean?"

"Don't you understand that if Blythe once saw the dance *properly* done he'd realize that it isn't my fault that it's going so badly now. I can't tell him it's Leyton's fault. Oh, Michael! This is the first real favour I've ever asked of you. If they're rude to you on the stage—and ten-to-one you won't be noticed—you can put up with that for a friend's sake, can't you? And if Blythe agrees to my showing him how the dance *should* go, no one will be rude."

"Not until it's over and I've made an ass of myself," returned Deering grimly.

"You *won't* make a fool of yourself. And even if you did, wouldn't you rather do that than let that *putrid* Leyton queer all my chances? I *can* dance with you, and I can't with him. We've rehearsed that dance together. Michael, once you said to me that no man could ever find a better little pal, don't you remember?

This won't take up more than ten minutes of your time, and . . ."

"Go ahead," said Michael. "I'm ready to be butchered to make a Roman holiday."

"Mr. Blythe wants to see this gentleman," said Peggy boldly to the stage-doorkeeper. She placated her conscience by swiftly deciding that if her statement wasn't quite true at the moment it would be shortly.

Having gained entrance to the sacred precincts of the stage, Michael was left to cool his heels near the prompt corner while Peggy pushed open the heavy iron pass-door leading down a few steps from the stage to the level of the stalls.

"Mr. Blythe!"

"What is it?" queried the producer testily, his eyes still on the stage.

"It's Peggy Vincent. Can I do my dance with another man when we come to it in the scene? Then there needn't be any break."

"Anyone know it?"

"Yes, I've rehearsed it with someone else."

"All right," snapped Blythe tersely. "Tell Bill we're going straight through."

Blythe, of course, imagined her new partner was one of the chorus men. Anyhow, he wouldn't realize it was a stranger to the cast until the dance was over.

Swiftly running back through the pass-door, she whispered to Bill, and then joined Michael. "We've just got to stroll on, sit at that table over there, and when the music starts get up and dance."

"Good Lord, Peggy! Easy for you to talk of 'strolling on.'"

"Easy for you, too. You've walked across a room before and sat down at a table, haven't you?"

"Not in front of a crowd like this."

"Come on! That's us."

Before he knew where he was Michael was across the stage and seated at the table. It really wasn't very difficult, and when the music started the dance was easier still. He'd never danced with Peggy in any unrestricted area. It was a real joy to swing over the wide stage with her in his arms.

The music came to an end and there was a sudden burst of applause. Michael was startled, but under cover of the sound of clapping hands Peggy whispered: "That's part of the play. Smile, and walk with me back to the table."

Michael grinned quite naturally. He was amused to think that he'd taken this stage applause as a personal tribute.

Peggy had a few lines to speak before they again walked off together. "That was grand, Michael. You've saved my bacon with Blythe."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you," remarked Michael pessimistically. "Anyhow, *my* bacon seems to be saved. No one's shown any disposition to lay violent hands on me as yet. What do I do now?"

"Just stick around. We'll be dismissed for lunch soon."

In another ten minutes they were once more together outside the stage-door. "Well, thank God that's over. I can't see what good it's done you, Peg. Let's find food. I feel I need it after that."

But Peggy knew just how much good it had done her. Blythe had passed the dance without comment. That was quite enough for her. How an experienced producer couldn't realize whose fault it was that the number had been going so badly she couldn't imagine. Now that

he'd seen it really well performed, however, he'd be able to detect where the trouble lay. The fact that Michael was *only* a ballroom dancer helped him enormously. And also helped her, for though she'd been trained in the ballet, she knew very well the difference between ballroom dancing and solo or ballet dancing. And her partner in this cabaret dance was supposed to have the bearing of a young English gentleman. What Blythe called a 'dude.' Michael looked the part. Held her in the correct manner. Leyton might have been giving an imitation of an apache.

Peggy was extremely pleased with the success of her strategy—until the afternoon's rehearsal! Then, on Leyton's somewhat belated appearance, she listened with horror to a particularly acrimonious passage-at-arms developing between Blythe and the actor.

The end of this came with startling suddenness. Leyton informed the irate producer that he could play the damn part himself, and walked out of the theatre.

"Bill! Where's the chap who danced this morning? Send him down here to me," shouted Blythe from the stalls.

Peggy's heart stood still! Now for it! Be sure your sin will find you out!

While Bill—not yet knowing by sight every male chorister—made vain enquiries amongst the crowd on the stage, Peggy dashed down through the pass-door to confess her crime to Blythe. She'd probably get the sack herself now! What a fool she'd been!

Blythe, however, though extremely angry with her, ended up by saying that though the young man didn't deserve an engagement, she'd better get hold of him quick and lively and bring him along. They could have a run through his lines before rehearsal next morning.

Peggy's heart sank still further. She dare not confess to Blythe that the young man who'd danced with her that day wasn't an actor and had no intention of becoming one. She'd never even mentioned to Michael that though Leyton had no dialogue in the cabaret scene, he had a few lines at the beginning of the first act. What chance had she of persuading Michael to appear on the stage—the real professional stage, in front of an audience—and not only dance, but speak! None whatever.

Nevertheless, as soon as her few scenes were concluded, and Bill informed her that she wasn't wanted again that afternoon, she passed swiftly out of the theatre, hailed a taxi, and set off to Michael's lodgings on her hopeless errand. She'd have to concoct some story for Blythe in the morning. Michael would have to assist her in the manufacturing of a plausible excuse.

Michael, as she knew he would be, was hard at work in his bed-sitting-room when she arrived. Miserably she decided that he wasn't too pleased at this interruption to his work. He'd be less pleased presently! But she'd got to get it over.

She'd thought herself so clever, she announced tragically, and now how she was ever going to get herself out of this mess she didn't know. Blythe would be furious!

Then, having told her story, and having kept a stiff upper lip while doing so, she suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, burst into tears.

Oh, why need she make such an *utter* fool of herself? she thought despairingly. She couldn't even *cry* decently. She was boohooing like a child and couldn't even find her handkerchief! Where was the damn thing, anyhow? She fumbled desperately in her handbag, but Michael thrust his into her hand.

"What's all the to-do about, Peg? What a hullabaloo about nothing at all. If you think I can speak those lines, of course I'll give it a go, as our good Aussies say. And if Blythe turns me down, it won't be your fault."

"Michael!" Peggy lifted up her poor tear-stained face to his. "You're not in earnest, are you? Oh, Michael, you don't know *what* you'd save me from if you'd only try."

"Of course I'll try."

"But you said you'd hate to . . . to put on grease-paint, and . . ."

"One talks a lot of hot-air at times," he returned hurriedly.

"And you'll come to rehearsal—at least, just before rehearsal—tomorrow?"

"I will."

"Oh, the weight of *despair* you've taken off my heart!"

"Well, dry your eyes, and blow your red little nose, and smile."

"Is it red?"

"Scarlet."

"I don't care if it's *puce*. Oh, Michael, I'm so happy!"

"Look it then."

"Wait till I find my puff. There! That's better." She examined herself in the small mirror from her bag. "It wasn't so *very* red. Just a delicate pink like cheap tinned salmon. Those lines, Michael. I know them myself. Give me your pencil and I'll write them down. Then we'll go through them. How lucky you managed to get your dress-suit out of . . . where you left it. That's all you need. I'll lend you grease-paint. You'll look marvellous! Blythe will fall over himself thinking how clever he is to have found you."

"I don't imagine he'll fall far," returned Michael dryly. 'Oh, Hell!' he was saying inwardly. 'What have I let myself in for now? But I couldn't see the poor kid cry, and in any case Blythe's not in the least likely to be such a blithering fool as to engage me.'

Yet next morning it appeared Blythe was just this sort of fool. Michael spoke his few lines intelligently; he looked the part; and he could dance. Somewhat dazed, he listened to the producer telling him he'd got just the right la-di-da sort of voice; that the part wouldn't carry more than seven pounds a week; and that he could sign his contract up in the office at noon.

He was now a member of the *Dancing Mad* company.

CHAPTER XXIII

“**H**AVE you an appointment, Sir?” enquired the clerk. “If not, I’m afraid Mr. Roberts won’t be able to see you. He’s very busy just now.”

‘Old Sam’ glared at the young man. “Has he got anyone in there with him now?” He jerked his head in the direction of Moreton Roberts’ private room.

“Not at the moment, Sir, but . . .”

“Then I’ll go in,” announced McDowell brusquely.

“But, Sir, you can’t interrupt . . .”

“Oh, can’t I,” returned the old man. Ignoring the clerk’s protestations, he crossed the outer office and swung open the door marked ‘Private.’

Roberts looked up with a scowl. A scowl that was instantly succeeded by a wide, toothy smile, extremely reminiscent of Mr. Carker. “My dear uncle! Why on earth didn’t you let me know you were coming to town? I’d have met you at the station.”

“I’m not in my second childhood yet, Moreton. I’m quite capable of engaging a taxi for myself and driving to an hotel.”

“Of course, of course!” Roberts laughed as though ‘Old Sam’ had to be applauded for some brilliant witticism. “But surely you’ll stay with us, won’t you? Adela and Cedric will be terribly disappointed if you don’t.”

“No use putting Adela to any trouble for one night. I’m going on to Canberra tomorrow.”

“In connection with this proposed reconstitution of the Migration Commission?”

McDowell nodded.

"Need you put yourself to the inconvenience of such a long journey? I can arrange the preliminaries by letter."

"I prefer to go into the matter myself."

"Oh, quite, quite! You . . . you haven't decided *definitely* on anything concerning Koolandra?"

"No. What I've come to see you about this morning is the boy."

Roberts' look of veiled annoyance vanished and he smiled in a pleased fashion. "Cedric? He's out at the moment, but he'll be delighted to . . ."

"Cedric isn't the only boy in the world," growled McDowell, and then, seeing his nephew's face fall, he added more kindly. "Of course I want to see Cedric. You and he might lunch with me. But it's the other—my boy—I'm asking about."

Moreton Roberts' face assumed a puzzled frown. "Your . . ."

"Don't be a fool, Moreton. I'm talking about Michael. I suppose he's still my boy whatever he's done, isn't he?"

"It's good of you to speak of him in that way," returned Roberts gravely. "Very few men who've been treated with such base ingratitude as you have would . . ."

"Damn it all! If he were the biggest criminal unhung it wouldn't alter the fact that he's my daughter's son, would it?"

"Unfortunately, no," answered the lawyer regretfully.

"I've been wondering lately if I haven't been too hard on the lad."

"You were too *kind*," returned Roberts quickly. "That, of course, was natural. You weren't to know that indulgence to a weak, pleasure-loving nature such as his . . ."

"He never struck me as particularly weak."

Roberts shook his head sorrowfully. "You hadn't the opportunities of judging him that I had. There was a bad strain somewhere—inherited. Oh, not from Molly's side, of course. But Deering had a queer unstable streak. I always sensed it."

"He made Molly happy enough."

"She was too loyal to let you know of any troubles between them. The very fact of his allowing you to provide entirely for his wife . . ."

"That isn't altogether true. He did what he could. At any rate he's dead and gone, and I've no desire to discuss him. Have you any idea what's happened to Michael?"

For a second the solicitor hesitated. "I imagine that he's left the State. Cedric heard rumours that he was mixed up with an actress."

"Rumour's a lying jade."

"As a matter of fact Cedric himself saw them together."

"Why should you imagine, then, that he's left the State?"

"She went to Queensland a short time ago with some variety artistes—knockabout comedians—a very disreputable crowd, I understand. Michael hasn't been seen in the city since then. I presume he went with her."

'Old Sam' frowned. "You still don't think it wise to make some provision for him?"

"For his actress friend, you mean?" suggested the lawyer. "No, my dear Uncle. As I told you before, the only chance of his regeneration is to leave him to work out his own salvation."

"According to you, he doesn't seem to be doing it."

"At least he hasn't fallen foul of the police again."

But if money were provided for him I don't like to think into what further trouble it might lead him. The fact that he could call upon you for unlimited supplies of ready cash was his undoing in the past. His only chance now is to learn to rely on himself."

"Aren't you inclined to be a trifle bitter against him?"

"I? Bitter?" Roberts' tone expressed hurt surprise. "That's the last thing of which I can be accused. On the contrary, I've done everything in my power to assist him. And—in spite of my conviction that it's extremely unwise—I'll endeavour to find him and pay him over whatever sum you consider necessary. Personally it seems to me that money spent in disreputable night-clubs with fast actresses isn't likely to be of much advantage to him. But naturally I'll do as you wish. How much did you think of allowing him?"

"I'll think it over and let you know," said 'Old Sam,' rising. He'd entirely forgotten his invitation to Moreton and Cedric to join him at luncheon. As he stumped out of the office he was remembering Michael's face as he said, "I haven't gone back on my resolve not to accept a penny piece from you until you realize the truth that I was wrongfully imprisoned." Was all that just bluff on the boy's part? Would he take money if it were offered?

Ever since Michael's visit to Koolandra 'Old Sam's' mind had been greatly disturbed. Was it possible that he had misjudged his grandson?

After weeks of indecision he'd decided to talk the matter over once more with his nephew. And this was all the satisfaction he got! Unsavoury stories of Michael's association with third-rate theatrical women. Well, that was all of a piece with everything he'd known

of the boy hitherto. Why should present confirmation of his previous adverse judgment distress him?

It didn't, 'Old Sam' told himself sternly, as he walked on to keep an appointment at the office of the Minister of Lands.

Yet Cedric Roberts, who, after seeing Michael and Peggy together, had made it his business to find out who the girl was, hadn't really proved himself altogether successful as a sleuth-hound. He had no idea that Peggy had returned to Sydney, and that she and Michael were, at the moment 'Old Sam' was interviewing his father, busily engaged in their final rehearsals for *Dancing Mad*.

Somewhat to his own surprise Michael found that his self-sacrifice in accepting Leyton's rôle to save Peggy acute embarrassment and humiliation wasn't proving a sacrifice at all! It was a stroke of extreme good fortune. Here he was provided for financially, probably for months to come, without the smallest effort on his own part! And to his amazement he didn't dislike the work—if one could call it work—in the very least. On the contrary, he was enjoying it. Blythe was so pleased with him that he added a few lines for him in the cabaret scene.

Delivering his small scraps of dialogue naturally and intelligently, and dancing competently with Peggy, didn't necessarily constitute histrionic ability, as Michael was well aware. He'd never be an actor in the real sense of the word. Nor did he wish to be. Yet this little interlude of stage experience would, he realized, be of immense value to him in the future if he ever tried his hand—as he certainly wished to do—at writing for the theatre.

So far neither he nor Peggy had thought of any plan

by which they might prove their suspicions concerning Cora Lascelles to be correct. They had neither of them come much into contact with the leading lady until the day of the first dress rehearsal.

Peggy's frock in the cabaret scene was a vivid shade of green in which Michael told her she looked as pretty as a picture. "A little wood-nymph," he declared.

Cora Lascelles had not dressed for the scene, but just before it started she came across to where Peggy and Michael stood and remarked abruptly: "I can't have you wearing that shade of green. It'll make my dress look insipid."

"But Mr. Blythe has passed all the frocks. He said yours was blue."

"It is, but that vivid colour will kill it."

"Well, it's nothing to do with me," replied Peggy. "I wear what I'm told to wear. You'll have to settle it with Mr. Blythe."

"I'll certainly see that you don't wear *that* dress."

Michael felt his temper rising. How dare she employ that arrogant tone to Peggy? Peggy, who looked like the spirit of spring—fresh, and sweet, and gay. Quite calmly he regarded Cora. "Was it blue or green, the dress you wore that night at the Korala?" he asked quietly. "The night you saw me chase after my car?"

Cora Lascelles swung round to face him. "I don't know what you're talking about!" she exclaimed vehemently.

"Oh, yes, you do," returned Michael, still retaining his self-control. "When Peggy introduced me to you some months ago you remembered having seen me before. Afterwards I remembered where it was. You were on the verandah at the Korala with a dark, thick-set man who . . ."

"You're impertinent!" Cora's voice had become suddenly shrill. "I've never visited the Korala in my life. You chorus people presume too much. I shall complain to the management if you continue to annoy me." Abruptly she turned on her heel and left them.

"She's forgotten about my dress," murmured Peggy.

"Because she's got something more important to think about," replied Michael. "In vulgar parlance, I've sent her away with a flea in her ear. You're right, Peg. She's the woman I'm looking for. But why is she so anxious to deny it? She's scared of something."

"Of her husband!" exclaimed Peggy. "That's what I told Mr. Craig once. And it's true. She was with some man at the Korala—some man she doesn't want Harry Brooks to know about. She's scared stiff at the thought of his finding her out."

"Surely she wouldn't let any poor chap go to gaol for two years to save herself from a little domestic scrap?"

"Oh, wouldn't she? You don't know her. And I fancy we neither of us know just what the Brooks' domestic scraps amount to. What a cheek she has! Calling us chorus! We've both got *parts*!"

Michael smiled. "So small, my dear, that you'd hardly notice them."

"Anyhow, we're *principals*, not chorus. Come on, we'd better get round. They'll be starting the scene in a minute."

Nothing further was said about Peggy's dress, but at the second dress rehearsal Cora Lascelles appeared in a brilliant scarlet gown. It was Peggy's frock which now was 'killed,' but fortunately Cora was not on the stage at the beginning of the cabaret scene, so that during their dance at least, Michael reflected with satisfaction, his little wood-nymph would not be overshadowed.

Whether Miss Lascelles had carried out her threat of reporting what she called their 'impertinence' to the management, neither Michael nor Peggy knew. If she had done so, her complaint had certainly produced no result. Cora herself ignored them completely, but as she'd never deigned to take much notice of them hitherto, the change was negligible as far as the offenders were concerned.

At all events they were convinced now that they had established the identity of one of the missing witnesses.

Whether this would serve any useful purpose or not they were unable as yet to determine.

CHAPTER XXIV

WITH two invalids on her hands—for Mrs. Montgomery was still extremely unwell and suffering a great deal from the intense heat—Kathleen had little time to gossip with her guests.

She had learned from Peggy, however, of Michael's engagement in *Dancing Mad*, and also of the progress of his novel, which was on the eve of completion.

Peggy was living at high tension in these days; and though Kathleen was delighted to know that the little dancer was happy and excited over her engagement, and Michael's inclusion in the cast of *Dancing Mad*, the older woman often had doubts as to how the affair with young Deering would end. Would poor little Peggy have to face the same bitter awakening which she herself had long ago experienced? Learn that a man's friendship, however sincere, was very far removed from love?

Joan Walsh, too, was apparently in something of the same position as Peggy. It was quite obvious that Joan had become infatuated with a young station-owner whom she had met recently at a cocktail party. Clara, of course, informed Kathleen that young Pat Earnshaw was 'mad' about Joan. Judging from the scraps of conversation Mrs. Armitage overheard at the telephone, and the account of various happenings retailed to her by Clara, Kathleen had her own ideas as to who was 'mad' about whom.

It wasn't, of course, at all fair to compare Peggy's

relationship to Michael with that of Joan and Pat Earnshaw. Peggy had far too much self-respect to make herself cheap. It was very evident that Michael, though he mightn't be at all in love with her, was almost as anxious for her society as she was for his. In Joan's case the poor girl seemed to be throwing herself at Earnshaw's head in a deplorably obvious fashion, and, as far as Kathleen could see, the young man merely accepted her attentions, though probably he was not averse to finding a pretty girl to flirt with.

Clara was overjoyed at being able to announce that Pat Earnshaw had promised to take Joan to the first night of *Dancing Mad*. She seemed quite oblivious of the fact that Kathleen must be well aware of how desperately and shamelessly Joan had angled for the invitation. "He's coming down from the country specially," said Clara. "Joan's got a lovely new evening frock. That's the best part of a mannequin's job, she says—getting models for next to nothing. Pat told her the other day that he considered her the best-dressed girl in Sydney. I wish her work didn't *tie* her so much. She can only get out now to a few cocktail parties and in the evenings. They'll probably go to supper somewhere after the theatre, and I do hope Joan won't be too standoffish with him. Young men nowadays seem to want so much encouragement. And it would be such a *splendid* match!"

Mrs. Armitage had her own ideas about this. She'd known Pat's parents in former days, and was quite aware that the young man in question had the reputation of being a heavy drinker. He was certainly the owner of a fine old property, and financially the match would undoubtedly be a good one. It would please Clara also from the point of view of 'family.' Perhaps one could

put up with a drunken husband for the sake of position and money! But the point seemed to be: was Joan to be given the chance of putting up with him?

Kathleen, however, had little time to spare for Joan and her matrimonial prospects. She had too many problems of her own to solve. One of the most pressing of these concerned her two invalids. The doctor informed her that it was imperative that they should both get away to the mountains, or, at any rate, somewhere removed from the enervating, humid heat of the city. How was she to meet this further expense?

For days Kathleen turned over in her mind the various expedients to which she might resort in order to raise money. She had already been forced to sell out the last of her investments. All she possessed now was 'Avalon'—which was mortgaged—and the furniture of the house. A bill-of-sale on this seemed to be the only means of providing the necessary amount required for Mrs. Montgomery's and John's visit to the country. A bill-of-sale always seemed to Kathleen the beginning of the end. If she weren't able to meet payments on this she would lose everything.

Still, wasn't it better to lose all wordly possessions than endanger the lives of those she loved? And the doctor had spoken very seriously of the need for both Mrs. Montgomery and John to get away. And the wordly possessions need not necessarily be lost merely because she was temporarily in need of ready cash!

The bill-of-sale it would have to be, but arranging for it seemed a shabby, shady sort of transaction in Kathleen's eyes. Something like entering a pawn-shop. She simply could not confess to Gordon Bates that she was reduced to such straits. She'd visit some other solicitor—a stranger.

The departure of John and Mrs. Montgomery to a country farmhouse took place on the day of the production of *Dancing Mad*. John had not been very anxious to spend six weeks in the country in the company of his grandmother, but Kathleen, by telling him that she relied upon him to look after the old lady, restored his threatened self-respect, and the idea of there being other boys at the farm with whom he could ride and play tennis—when he felt stronger—was an added inducement.

The Service Car by which they were to travel left the city about midday, and Kathleen, having waved farewell to her two invalids, was making her way back to the Quay when she came face to face with Peter Craig.

"Hello!" he said. "Where are you bound for?"

"Home," she answered, and then told him that she had just packed off her mother and John to the country.

"John's in safer hands, you think, with his grandmother than he would have been in mine?"

He was still feeling a trifle sore, then, over her refusal to allow John to accompany him on his cruise.

"You know I never meant that he wouldn't be safe with you."

"All right. I understand."

"I don't think you do."

"Going to see your little friend in *Dancing Mad* to-night?" he enquired, dismissing the subject of John.

She shook her head. "First nights are not for me."

"If I can get two seats—it's a bit late, but I'm sure I can wangle it—will you come with me?"

"I'd love it—but I don't see how I could manage——"

"All right." Again he was misunderstanding her hesitation—thought she didn't wish to be seen in public with him.

"Peter," she said quietly. "You aren't being very kind."

"In what way?"

"You're huffy and abrupt. Pretending that you think I don't want to accept your invitation."

"Well, do you?"

"Of course I do. I'd simply love to go with you to-night. I was only wondering whether I could get away."

"You're not bound hand and foot to 'Avalon,' are you?"

"It's Vera's day off—but I'll fix it up somehow. Oh, I do hope you can get the seats."

"Don't worry. I'll get them. How about dining with me first?"

"No, I couldn't manage that. It'll be as much as I can do to get to the theatre by eight o'clock."

"Then we'll have supper somewhere afterwards."

Again she looked a little dubious.

"You can ask Peggy to join us if that will please you better."

"I'm sure she'd love it."

"Very well, then. That's settled. Five minutes to eight at the theatre. I've got to rush now. Late for an appointment as it is."

It was nice of Peter to include Peggy in his invitation, Kathleen told herself as she went on her way; and then, somewhat horrified at her own duplicity, realized that, much as she loved Peggy, she'd felt queerly hurt when Peter had suggested she should join them. How foolish that was! Why should she be disappointed at the knowledge that he didn't care whether they were alone or not. And Peggy would be delighted to come to supper, unless she and Michael had already arranged to go somewhere together after the show.

The little dancer had been late home on the previous night after the final dress rehearsal, and Kathleen had given instructions that her breakfast was to be sent up to her and that none of the maids were to disturb her in her room until lunch-time. When she reached home, however, she found that Peggy had been up for some time. "I couldn't rest," she explained. "I'm always so excited before a first night. And I've never had lines to speak before. Suppose I dry up?"

"I thought you said you were an actress," jeered Kathleen.

"So I am. *Actresses—real actresses—*are always nervous."

"And will Michael be nervous too?"

"I don't think he's exactly nervous. But he's still sensitive about being recognized. He's on the programme as Denning, but there are sure to be people in front who knew him as Deering."

"Stupid of him to feel he's got to hide for the rest of his life. He can't avoid occasionally running into people he's known before."

"He hasn't so far. At least, only once. Before Christmas it was. We passed Cedric Roberts, and he just looked at Michael with sort of sneer. Horrid little rotter."

Who's Cedric Roberts?"

"He's the son of Moreton Roberts . . ."

"Moreton Roberts!" exclaimed Kathleen.

"Yes. I told you about him. The solicitor, Michael's cousin—at least, his mother's cousin—who Michael says was responsible for . . ."

"Oh, yes, I remember," said Kathleen hurriedly. *What* a fool she'd been. That was where she'd heard the name before, and why, when deciding in connection

with the bill-of-sale that she couldn't go to Gordon Bates, the name 'Moreton Roberts' had suddenly jumped into her mind!

She certainly hadn't found Mr. Roberts very prepossessing when she'd been ushered into his office, and wished then that she'd shown a little more courage and consulted Gordon Bates. She hadn't liked the idea of Bates knowing that she was in such difficulties, but now she liked still less the thought that the man who'd arranged this somewhat humiliating business for her was the man Michael looked upon as his enemy.

Well, she'd only her own stupidity to thank for having consulted a solicitor of whom she knew no more than that his name seemed vaguely familiar.

She consoled herself by reflecting that Roberts could possess no clue to her connection with his young cousin. Not that it mattered much if he did. Yet somehow it was distasteful to her to think that she had gone to him.

In spite of her annoyance at her foolish blunder, Kathleen couldn't help realizing the element of ironic humour in the situation! Here was she, one of Michael's best friends, gravely consulting on a matter of private business the man Deering blamed for most of his misfortune!

The sooner she could pay off the debt, the better she'd be pleased—not only to relieve her natural personal anxiety, but to sever all connection with a man who was so intimately concerned with Michael's affairs.

CHAPTER XXV

KATHLEEN found Peter Craig awaiting her amongst the crowd of first-nighters in the foyer of the theatre a few minutes before eight o'clock. Most gorgeously attired were all these first-nighters, and as the evening was insufferably warm few wore more than the flimsiest of wraps over their very elaborate gowns—gowns which would be duly chronicled in next morning's paper.

Kathleen had not confessed to Craig that one of her reasons for hesitating to accept his invitation was the lack of any suitable garment in which to appear. She knew that a 'first night' was usually seized upon by Sydney women for the display of the best their wardrobes boasted. With a rueful little smile she reflected that she was doing likewise; her old black lace was certainly her best, but it was a very poor best compared to the dresses around her.

This slight attack of self-consciousness concerning her appearance was quickly dissipated by Peter's greeting. "You look like a million dollars, Kathleen! Why doesn't every woman realize that there's nothing so becoming as black?"

If he wasn't aware that her frock was out of date it mattered not at all what others thought of it.

They passed together into the stalls of the theatre. The orchestra had already taken their places in front of the footlights. There was a general air of excitement as all the chattering first-nighters were ushered into their seats.

"Didn't you say you saw this play in London?" asked

Kathleen, and immediately regretted her remark. He'd most probably seen it then with Mrs. Deans. Might she not be evoking memories of an occasion he would prefer to forget?

If that were so he gave no sign of it, for he answered cheerfully enough: "Yes, a jolly good show. I'm not a very highbrow playgoer, I'm afraid. But there was a very clever little girl playing the lead there. I don't see why they've given the part here to that Lascelles woman. Your little friend Peggy is much more the type. It's a sort of Cinderella story."

"Cora Lascelles is supposed to be a draw. She's played lead in ever so many musical shows. Peggy's never had a line to speak up to the present. She's terribly grateful to you for getting her this small part."

"I didn't get it for her. Dantry was responsible for that. He thinks she's a clever dancer and has personality. He liked her in the vaudeville act."

"Michael wrote that, you know."

"Who's Michael?"

Under cover of the overture music Kathleen explained the identity of Michael, and with a little teasing air of triumph informed her companion that he would see the young man he persisted in regarding as a crook on the stage tonight.

Craig was intensely amused. "So your two lame dogs are to perform for our benefit? What a rum go? How did you engineer that?"

"I had nothing whatever to do with it."

As briefly as she could she conveyed to him some idea of the story as recounted to her by Peggy. "So, you see," she ended with great self-satisfaction, "you'll have to admit tonight that my confidence in them both was justified."

"I don't admit anything of the sort. The fact that the young man has managed to secure an engagement in the chorus here doesn't disprove my contention that he's not altogether the clean potato. I never heard of any moral turpitude act in operation against applicants for theatrical work."

Kathleen laughed. "You're incorrigible," she remarked, but the rising of the curtain put an end to further argument.

The cabaret scene in which Peggy and Michael danced took place at the end of the first act. As the curtain fell Craig turned to Kathleen, smiling. "He's certainly a very personable young man. I don't wonder at the interest he inspired in you. You were always rather susceptible to good looks, weren't you? Shall we ask him to join us at supper?"

"I doubt if he'd come."

"Why not? Is he still so devoted to you that he'd resent my presence as host?"

"Don't be so absurd."

"Then would the fact of his having occupied a position as waiter in your house make him . . ."

"He'd think no more of that than I should. But Peggy tells me he's very sensitive about meeting people he knew before . . ." she paused for a moment, and Craig went on: "Before he was jugged? If he's quite innocent of any offence, why should he mind?"

"At his age, wouldn't you have been a trifle sensitive at the thought of people looking down their noses at you?"

"At his age . . . I don't know. I've become so hardened to every sort of look—sour, shocked, and disapproving—since then that I've lost the finer feelings of youth. You don't mind my asking him?"

"Of course I don't."

"I'll send round a note to Peggy and ask her to bring him along. I suppose you're swelling with pride at your success as an animal trainer, aren't you?"

"I didn't teach either of them to dance, that I'm aware of."

"But you're absolutely bursting with pride at their success. I heard all the little press-studs on your frock going off pop just now."

Kathleen laughed. "Your hearing's abnormally acute if you can catch the sound of non-existent fasteners. But at least I'm glad you admit those two young things have made a success of their little scene. I think they ought to have had *much* more to do. Peggy looks adorable in that dress."

"And Michael? That suit of his suggests Savile Row to me—not an Australian tailor. Who is the young man, anyhow?"

"I told you, his name is Deering. Curiously enough, I think I must once have met his mother. At any rate, he says I was photographed in a group with her. But perhaps you'll regard that as a clever invention on his part?"

"Do you remember having the group taken?"

"Yes, quite well, though I don't recollect Mrs. Deering."

"When was it?"

"Years ago."

"Where?"

"In the country." She couldn't bring herself to mention Kolong and all its tragic memories, so went on, "He has a rich old grandfather."

"And grandpapa paid for those tails?"

"Ask Peggy. Michael and she have been together a

great deal lately. He's probably told her more about himself than he's told me."

Craig scribbled a little note and handed it to one of the ushers. "We'll hope Peggy can persuade him to come."

Kathleen smiled round at the man beside her. "Why this anxiety to meet a young man you persist in regarding as a crook? Do you want him to give you the address of his tailor?"

"I shouldn't mind having it. Unfortunately I haven't his figure. My more robust proportions wouldn't show off any suit to such advantage. But my reasons for wishing to make the young man's acquaintance aren't solely concerned with sartorial matters."

"You want to satisfy yourself as to how far one may believe his story?"

"That and . . . other things, yes. Here's the second act starting. Have those two much more to do?"

"Very little, I believe. But I'm *terribly* pleased they've done so well up to now."

"No need to tell me that," returned Craig dryly. "The rest of the performance has been wasted on you."

"Oh, no!" answered Kathleen hastily. "I'm enjoying every minute of it."

At the final fall of the curtain it was quite evident that *Dancing Mad* had been an unqualified success. Probably very few in the audience, beside Kathleen and Craig, remembered the trifling share in this success achieved by Peggy and Michael. They were merely two small-part people who had carried out efficiently the rôles assigned to them. No one in the audience was likely to be stirred to great enthusiasm by a few lines of dialogue and a gracefully executed dance. Peggy knew enough of the stage to realize the truth of the

saying 'the part makes the actress.' All she and Michael had done was of very little importance to the play, and would be passed over unnoticed save by the producer, to whom every detail in his show was of the utmost value. It was by the perfecting and building up of these small details that success would be assured to the production.

If only, thought Peggy, she'd been given the chance to play the lead! She couldn't compete with Cora Lascelles in the singing line, she knew, but voice wasn't nearly as important in this part as personality and dancing ability. Gina, in the play, was a child of the streets—dancing in the first act to the music of a barrel-organ. The sophisticated Cora looked about as much like a street-arab as a bird of paradise looked like a cheeky little sparrow. And her dancing! Oh la! la! How did she ever manage to get away with it? thought Peggy. She faked half the steps, yet Gina at the end of the play was represented as a world-famous ballerina! Half the audience didn't know good dancing from bad, reflected Peggy. All they saw was Cora's handsome face and figure.

Anyhow, the show was in for a good run! That was the main thing, and Michael had got through splendidly. Blythe was pleased with them both, he'd told her so.

Peggy, removing her grease-paint in the brightly-lighted dressing-room amongst the crowd of chattering, excited girls, knew that she was thinking far more of Michael than of any stage success. He'd hated accepting Craig's invitation to supper—she knew that—and yet he'd yielded to her persuasion. Something in his face when he said, "If you're set on my going, Peg, I'll go," had raised a sudden tumult in her heart.

"Hi! What the hell are you doing, Peggy?" exclaimed the girl beside her. "You're not going out to supper in your green cabaret dress, are you? Blythe would skin you alive!"

"Gosh!" Peggy replaced the dress on its hanger and took down her own cheap little evening frock. "I wasn't thinking of what I was doing."

"Sez you!" returned one of the girls sarcastically. "You've got a neck, I must say, thinking you could get away with that."

"Eileen's sore because Mrs. Timms reported her for wearing her gold shoes after the dress rehearsal," jeered another. "Don't take any notice of her, Peggy."

But Peggy wasn't to be disturbed by anything anyone said. Rather wistfully she wished she *might* appear at supper in the billowing tulle of her leaf-green frock, but it was in sheer absence of mind—her thoughts all of Michael—that she had taken it off the hook.

Yet when she joined young Deering at the stage-door, clad in the blue organdie she had made herself, he thought, in spite of his own unhappy preoccupation, that he had never seen her looking more attractive. Her vivid little face was alight with excitement, her eyes shining like stars. "Oh, Michael, *smile!*" she said, giving his arm a little squeeze. "You look about as cheerful as a wet Sunday on tour. Mr. Craig's a perfect lamb, and you'll see your beloved Kathleen."

"And probably others I used to know," returned Michael acidly.

"Well, they won't *bite* you, will they? What a juggins you are, Michael, to make so much fuss about a spot of bother that might have happened to anyone. Smile, damn you, *smile!*"

Michael smiled, but rather ruefully. 'A spot of bother!' Both Mrs. Tresscott and Peggy used the same phrase. Two years in gaol, and a damaged reputation, amounted to a trifle more than this, but no one who had not gone through his own bitter experience would be likely to realize what it meant. However, Peggy had behaved like a little trump to him from the first, and for both her sake and Kathleen Armitage's it behoved him not to appear at supper looking like a bear with a sore head. This Peter Craig that Peggy talked of so much was a different proposition. He dreaded meeting strangers who must be aware of his disgrace—and it wasn't likely that Craig was in ignorance of his history—dreaded, too, the chance of being recognized by old-time acquaintances.

Craig proved anything but alarming. He chatted quite easily as he piloted the party away from the theatre towards his car. And for the short drive to Ferando's, where they were to have supper, Peggy sat in front with him and Michael was beside Kathleen in the back. Conversation with her was never difficult. He'd seen so little of her since the days at 'Avalon' that there was much to talk about even after her eager congratulations and comments on the play were over. She wanted to hear all about the novel. Was delighted to know that it was actually finished and despatched to a man Deering had known at Cambridge who was now with his father's publishing firm in London.

"Of course a first novel hasn't much chance of acceptance—and certainly not by the first publisher it goes to—but Alick Firth will see that it's considered carefully, at any rate."

"First novels *have* been accepted by the first publishers they've been submitted to. Why shouldn't yours

be? Peggy says you've read it chapter by chapter to her and she loves it."

"Peggy's a very kind critic."

"She's a kind little girl altogether, but I don't see that that makes her any less a judge of what's interesting. She says it's *enthraling!*"

Michael laughed. "Peggy would."

"Would what?" asked Peggy, breaking off her animated conversation with Craig to lean backwards in the car and face the others.

"Michael thinks you're too much his friend to be an unbiased critic of his book."

"Michael flatters himself!" returned Peggy sharply. "If I'd thought it was tosh, I'd have told him so. It isn't. It's jolly good. I don't know enough about 'literary' writing to tell whether it's that or not, but it's *interesting*. It's all quite probable, and it's an exciting story. That's what most people want—a good story. Michael's everlastingly quoting to me some highbrow's remark: 'The lowest form of literature. What happened next.' And he says this is only that. But what I say is, that *everyone* wants to know what happens next if the people in the story are alive and sort of . . . sort of sympathetic. If they're not, it doesn't matter a damn what happens to them. They can be hanged, drawn, and quartered for all the readers care. And Michael's characters *are* real and interesting. That's why his book will be taken."

"That's good psychology, Peggy," said Craig.

"Is it? I didn't know I was a psychol . . . whatever you call them. But I probably am. I'm a very clever little creature *really*. Michael doesn't realize what brain-power I have."

On their arrival at Ferando's Kathleen recognized it

as the same place to which Peter had brought her on that afternoon some months ago when he had insisted on her dancing with him. Had he known then of Mrs. Deans' proposed marriage? That his association with her was over? Why should these stupid questions tease her mind? With an effort Kathleen dismissed them.

The head waiter ushered them onwards through the crowd of dancers to a reserved table. Just as they were taking their places another party of half a dozen young people brushed past them. Joan Walsh, talking with animation to a tall, bored young man who walked beside her, paused for a moment as she recognized Kathleen and Peggy. "Hello!" she said in a surprised tone, and then her eyes travelled further to rest on Michael. "Good Heavens!" she exclaimed, and moved hurriedly onwards.

"What is it?" asked her companion.

Most of her reply came clearly enough to every member of Craig's party. "That man—the one who danced with Peggy Vincent—I *thought* I'd seen him before somewhere. He used to be a waiter in our house, and he had to leave because the police . . ." the rest of the sentence was lost to them, but Joan's escort—whom Kathleen guessed must be Pat Earnshaw—turned round and favoured them with a long stare.

Michael did not look up, though Kathleen saw the colour rise hotly in his face. Saw, too, Peggy's quick little gesture as she seized his hand beneath the table and held it.

"I've ordered champagne," remarked Craig cheerily. "We must drink success to *Dancing Mad* and to the success of your novel too, Deering. If it's as good as the little show you and Peggy put over this evening you needn't be afraid of it's being turned down. In fact, I

don't think you need be afraid of *anything* in the future."

Michael raised his flushed face and looked Craig fairly in the eyes. "Thank you, Sir," he said; and Kathleen, watching them both, knew that it was no longer necessary for her to argue with Craig as to Michael's honesty. The young man himself had resolved all doubts in Peter's mind.

CHAPTER XXVI

IF Joan Walsh's too loudly spoken comments were not forgotten, at least they were not allowed to further embarrass Craig's party. Michael himself saw to that. Kathleen couldn't but admire the way in which he put aside his first acute discomfiture and laughed and talked quite naturally with Craig and Peggy

As supper ended Peter turned to Kathleen. "We going to repeat our performance here? Shall we dance?"

She shook her head. "This isn't one of my dancing nights." Nothing would induce her to join that well-dressed crowd upon the shining floor and so display shoes that had seen their best days and a three-year old frock. "Peggy will dance with you."

"Peggy's already booked. She's Deering's partner. I'm not going to cut in there."

Peggy glanced swiftly across at Michael. "Oh, he'd rather not dance again tonight."

"Do you mean *you'd* rather not?" asked Michael.

"*Don't* be silly! You know how I *love* to dance."

"Come along then!" He turned to Craig and Kathleen. "You don't mind?"

Kathleen smiled. "I shall enjoy watching you." Her eyes rested for a moment, with a hint of maternal tenderness, on Peggy's ardent little face as the two young people swung off together.

"Madonna!" said Craig quietly.

"What?"

"You have a Madonna-like expression at times. Didn't you know it?"

Kathleen turned a laughing face in his direction. "I'm afraid some of my guests, Miss Hobhouse, for instance, wouldn't endorse that opinion. I've heard myself described in many ways, but never as Madonna-like—far from it."

"I only said you *looked* Madonna-like as you glanced at Peggy. Very magnanimous, I call it."

"What do you mean?"

"To gaze so fondly on your rival. That young man would much rather *not* have courted further publicity by dancing here. He did it to please Peggy. And that proves, I'm afraid, my dear, that you've lost his whole-hearted allegiance."

"The idea that I ever had it existed in your imagination only."

"I'm willing to bet you anything you please that at one time he cherished a very ardent affection for you. I was rather anxious to find out just how far his heart was engaged. That's why I asked him here tonight. Sorry, my dear, but I fear that Peggy's cut you out."

"You don't sound in the least sorry," returned Kathleen, laughing. "There's a nasty touch of malice in your tone."

Craig's smile answered hers. "Is there? Well, you must confess that the present attachment—of which I fancy the young man himself isn't as yet fully aware—is more suitable. Love's young dream, you know."

"I thought you didn't believe in love."

"Really? What made you think that?"

"You jeered at me for being what you called 'incurably romantic.'"

"Did I? Perhaps I meant in connection with your unshaken determination to see the best in everyone."

"You give me credit for more than I deserve," said

Kathleen, with a little grimace. "I can't see *any* good in some of the dreadful people I have to be polite to in my 'hash house,' as you call it. Quite frankly, I detest them."

Craig grinned. "That's better. I'm glad to learn you're human."

"But do you think Michael is really fond of Peggy?"

"That's my belief. And it's quite easy to see that the child adores him."

Kathleen gave a quick, small sigh. "Where's it going to lead them then? There isn't the faintest hope that they could ever marry."

"Why not?"

"You must have *something* in order to set up house-keeping together. Michael hasn't a penny. Oh, he's earning a few pounds now, I know, but this is only a temporary job."

"Both you and Peggy seemed determined to persuade him that his novel would be accepted."

"And if it is, what will that amount to? I've seen somewhere that if an author makes fifty pounds out of a first novel he's lucky. Two people couldn't live for long on that, could they? And Peggy's earnings are most precarious."

"So, in spite of your 'incurable romanticism,' you'd never advise taking a chance in marriage?"

"But the odds would be so heavily against them. And grinding poverty isn't the best atmosphere in which to preserve what you call 'love's young dream.'"

"I suppose you ought to know. You weren't prepared yourself to take a chance."

Kathleen's eyes widened as she looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Cast your mind back twenty years, my dear. There

was a penniless lad head over ears in love with you then. But you didn't believe in the possibility of his ever making good."

"Peter!"

"I'm not blaming you, and I'm not saying you accepted Armitage because he had money. Doubtless he pleased you better. I reminded you earlier this evening of your susceptibility to good looks, and he was certainly damned handsome."

"But, Peter," stammered Kathleen. "You didn't . . ."

He leant across the table and patted her hand as it nervously crumbled the remains of a roll. "I'd no right to recall old days, had I?" he said kindly. "They're over and done with. Gone beyond recall. Let's forget them. It was probably the date that made me hark back to the past."

"The date?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten the day you became engaged," he answered, smiling at her. "Isn't it a fact that romantically-inclined women always preserve in their memories a little private calendar? The day the loved one proposed, the wedding-day, the birth of the first child. I've always understood . . ."

"It's a perfectly *marvellous* floor," said Peggy's voice close at hand; and Kathleen realized that the music had stopped, and Michael and Peggy were reseating themselves at the table.

Conversation became general once more. Peter was laughingly challenging Peggy to teach him the tango. Kathleen forced herself to smile at some remark of Michael's.

But her mind was in a confused and troubled tumult. This date—yes, it was true, she had her own private calendar—coincided with Peter's sudden desertion of

her. It was not until some time later that she had accepted John Armitage. Out of pique? No, not altogether. With Peter absent, John's whirlwind wooing had swept her off her feet, and persuaded her that her attachment to young Craig had meant no more than a passing infatuation. Had it passed? Kathleen knew now only too well that it had slumbered but never died. Peter Craig was still dearer to her than any other man had ever been. With him she seemed more herself—more vital, yet more at peace—than with any other living being. And she had no share in his life. Would never now be one with him. It was all too late.

Back to Kathleen's mind came the memory of that day when she had taxed her mother with her antagonism to Peter. Had there been any misunderstanding, twenty years ago, to lead to the break between Peter and herself? If so, did Mrs. Montgomery hold the clue to it? No, that wasn't in any way probable, and yet something of remembered doubt lingered deep down in Kathleen's recollection of that little scene between mother and daughter on the afternoon when she had announced her intention of driving out towards Narra-been with Peter in his car.

Backwards and forwards moved the tangled shuttle of her thought. If only they could be alone together she might ask Peter to explain his queer mistake regarding the date of her engagement. Yet would anything be gained by doing that? Probably after this lapse of time Peter had forgotten that he himself had definitely broken with her weeks before she promised to become John Armitage's wife. In those first unhappy days she'd humbled herself on two occasions by telephoning to ask him to see her, and each time Craig had quite cheerily produced some perfectly natural and valid

excuse which prevented him from acceding to her request.

No, it was useless to ask for explanation. Craig had in some curious fashion managed to persuade himself that the break between them had been by her wish, not his. After all, it was immaterial to argue now as to where the responsibility rested. As he said, the old days were over and done with—gone beyond recall.

For another half-hour she managed to keep up a pretence of good spirits, but she was not sorry when Craig suddenly remarked: "You're tired, Kathleen. It's time I took you home."

"I'm not really tired, but I think we ought to go. Peggy and I have to catch the last boat."

"No, you haven't. I'm driving you over."

"But it's such a long way," objected Kathleen.

"Not at all. What's our bridge for? You come, too, Deering, and I'll run you home afterwards."

It was no use protesting further; no use raising objections when Craig ordered the two young people to get in at the back and announced that Kathleen would sit beside him on the front seat.

Here she continued to make a valiant effort to chat lightly and brightly as the smooth-running Daimler passed over the great bridge. All the reaches of the harbour, silvered in the moonlight, lay below them. Like glittering fairy palaces the lighted ferry-boats moved across the shimmering plain; and points of colour—the red, green, blue, and orange of neon signs—flashed from the high buildings of the city up to the wide, starry sky.

"It's been a heavenly night," sighed Peggy as they said farewell at the 'Avalon' gate. "You're a darling, Mr. Craig, to have given us such a marvellous time."

Kathleen was silent as they walked along the short garden path to the house.

"You enjoyed it too, didn't you, Mrs. Armitage?" enquired Peggy anxiously.

"I should think I did!" returned Kathleen with a great show of heartiness. "And I'm delighted that you and Michael did so well."

"If *only* that *cat* of a Joan hadn't said that," sighed Peggy. "Michael hated it."

"He's got to get used to remarks of that sort. But, all the same, I'll have a word with Joan in the morning. I won't have her spreading unfair reports like that."

"It was brave of him to dance with me afterwards, wasn't it? I know he hated making himself conspicuous."

"Very wise of him not to pay any attention to such stupid chatter. Turn up the light on the stairs, Peggy, and I'll put this one out."

Now that there was no further need for pretence, Kathleen's face looked tired and sad as she followed the little dancer up the stairs.

CHAPTER XXVII

*D*ANCING MAD had been running merrily for several weeks, and still neither Peggy nor Michael had evolved any plan by which they might compel Cora Lascelles to confess that she had witnessed the stealing of Michael's car on the night of the accident.

To Peggy's chagrin, Mr. Vincent, now that his daughter was in receipt of a regular salary, had begun to haunt the stage-door, but Peggy remained firm in her resolve not to pay over any further sums of money to her father until he could produce some evidence which might be of use in the Deering case.

Though once or twice Vincent had met Michael in Peggy's company, and had recognized him with loudly expressed astonishment as the young swagger to whom he had given a lift along the Western Highway, he still did not connect him in any way with the man Deering whom Peggy seemed so anxious to befriend.

How long she would be able to keep her father in ignorance of Michael's identity, Peggy didn't know. He would be sure to discover it sooner or later, and then not only would he pester his daughter for money, but would endeavour to extract it from Michael as well.

In the meantime, to the girl's relief, Michael treated Mr. Vincent as something of a joke, and accepted his relationship to herself quite philosophically. Though he did nothing to encourage further intimacy with the shoddy, bombastic little man, he was perfectly friendly in their few encounters, and Peggy was never conscious of any personal embarrassment in meetings between them.

At 'Avalon,' thanks to Joan Walsh, everyone knew that Maurice—their erstwhile waiter—was now appearing with Peggy at the theatre.

Miss Hobhouse remarked acidly to Peggy that she hoped the management were aware of the fact that the police suspected the young man of having served a term in gaol, to which Peggy replied sweetly that it wasn't altogether wise to repeat statements of this sort unless one had definite proof that they were true—there happened to be a law of libel under which offenders might be prosecuted.

Mrs. Armitage warned Joan in somewhat the same fashion; and requested Clara—though she realized that her request wasn't really likely to be acted upon in any very definite manner—to give her daughter a severe talking-to upon the folly and danger of making damaging remarks regarding other people.

Mrs. Walsh, of course, couldn't be relied upon to administer anything more than the mildest of reproofs to her daughter. The way in which Clara was allowing the girl to go out night after night—often to the most disreputable of night-clubs and cabarets—was absurdly foolish. Pat Earnshaw was up in town for an indefinite period, apparently, and it was from Peggy that Kathleen had heard of some of the wild parties at which Joan had been present. Peggy herself seldom visited these cabarets, but many of the chorus in *Dancing Mad* did so, and Joan Walsh's name was rapidly becoming a by-word amongst them.

Kathleen, after some hesitation, ventured to offer Joan a little kindly advice on the subject. To which Joan replied frigidly that her affairs were no one's business but her own.

'Aren't they, indeed!' thought Kathleen, remember-

ing the twenty pounds—which she could ill afford to lose—spent in extricating Joan from one foolish scrape. Joan herself had apparently forgotten this incident, and Kathleen, though sorely tempted to remind her of it, refrained from doing so. After all, one couldn't go throwing past favours in people's teeth. To do so would be ungenerous and serve no useful purpose. Nevertheless, it seemed rather dreadful to stand quietly by and let the foolish child ruin her life!

At the risk of being thought interfering and 'Hob-housish,' Kathleen dropped a quiet hint to Clara that Joan was getting herself talked about.

"My dear Kathleen," returned Clara. "It's only the duds that *aren't* talked about nowadays. Of course the set Joan knows would have been considered fast in our time, but what you never seem to understand is that the world's changed since we were girls. And if Joan didn't go about with this crowd she'd have no opportunity of seeing Pat Earnshaw. *Any* day now I'm expecting her to tell me they're engaged."

After this Kathleen gave it up. Perhaps Clara was right. Joan might succeed in capturing the young man—might reform him (and herself, if necessary)—and live happily ever after. One could never tell!

Peggy, happy in her work and in her constant association with Michael, was nevertheless worried over their joint failure to make further progress with their investigations into Michael's case. Now that they had both saved a little money she suggested that they should consult a private detective agency.

"Are you proposing to dissipate your savings on my behalf?" asked Michael.

Put in that way, it sounded almost impertinence on her part, for what right had she to make herself in any

way responsible for the cost of his rehabilitation? "I only meant you could borrow from me, Michael," she stammered. "You can easily pay me back the money later."

The evening performance was over, and they were walking together along Macquarie Street down towards the Quay. It was an understood thing now that Michael should accompany her to the wharf each night to catch her boat across the harbour. More often than not these walks were so protracted that Peggy only succeeded in catching the very last ferry.

The air tonight was cool and humid, with a north-east wind rattling the palms that bordered the grassy slopes leading down to the Domain and the Gardens. Very few pedestrians moved along the pavement, and only the stars in the wide clear sky looked down at Michael as, before he answered, he threw his arm about the girl beside him and lightly kissed her.

"What a loyal little pal you are, Peg," he said quietly.

It was merely a brotherly kiss, she told herself, and he released her immediately, but nevertheless his voice had expressed more feeling than he had ever before displayed.

"You'll let me do it?" she asked eagerly.

He shook his head. "I'm not quite such a rotter as all that, my dear."

"But, Michael . . ."

"No. In any case it would be money thrown away. What more could detectives do than we're doing?"

"But we're not getting on at all. All we're sure of is that Cora is one of the people you're looking for. Dad says he's seen that man again—the one who talked of her being at the Korala. Couldn't we get him

to the theatre—bring them face to face somehow—and *make* her own up that she was there and saw you?”

“And have a jolly old row back-stage and both get fired. No, I don’t think *that’s* a very good idea, Peg.”

“I know!” exclaimed Peggy suddenly. “She and Harry Brooks are going with a party up to the Three Blind Mice after the show on Monday night. Dad might be able to get the man to come there—we’d have to pay him something, of course . . .”

“I’d have to pay him, you mean. No, I don’t think that’s much of a brain-wave either, Peg. There’d be a hell of a row, and we’d probably be fired for it just the same. We don’t want to lose our perfectly good jobs. It doesn’t matter so much for me, but I won’t let you risk . . .”

“I’ll keep out of it if there’s a row. I promise you that. And then she couldn’t complain of me to the management. But I’d have to be *there*, Michael. I couldn’t miss it.”

They proceeded to argue over this plan. As Peggy pointed out, the Three Blind Mice had been raided so often that the proprietor wouldn’t want to advertise any disturbance taking place there—it would be hushed up as much as possible—and probably nothing would be said to Blythe about it, whatever happened.

“And nothing *will* happen except that we’ll almost certainly be chucked out,” returned Michael pessimistically.

In the end, however, he went so far as to agree that if Mr. Vincent could get hold of his friend, and induce him—for a consideration—to be present at supper at the Three ~~Blind~~ Mice on the following Monday night,

he (Michael) would take Peggy there also. "But what on earth you hope to achieve by confronting her with this man, God only knows. She'll deny his story of having seen her there just as she's denied mine."

Having gained his consent to her plan, Peggy was delighted. "We'll feel we're doing *something*, Michael."

"Oh, yes," he returned cheerfully. "Getting ourselves into a nasty mess, if nothing else."

"Hasn't my advice been good in the past?"

He was forced to agree that it had.

"And, you'll see, we'll find *some* way to make Cora 'come across,' as they say in the flicks."

"Ever and always the little optimist. Here! Hi! You'll have to run for it, Peggy. It'll be a taxi across the bridge for us if you miss that boat."

Together they raced over the tram lines and along the Quay towards her wharf. The warning-bell was ringing, but she was through the gate and on to the boat a second before the gang-plank was swung aboard. Then, turning to wave farewell to Michael, who was still standing beyond the barrier, she made her way up on to the open deck. Above her stretched the wide vault of the starry sky, and as the ferry moved out over the smooth, dark water the spangled city and the jewelled line of the great bridge were left behind.

Always she loved this little journey to and fro across the harbour—whether it were in the brilliant sunshine of the morning with ships from all the seven seas—battered tramps, luxury liners, grimy colliers—moving over the blue and sparkling water, or at night when lights gleamed from every jutting promontory and showed on every passing vessel. Yet at this moment she couldn't help thinking a trifle wistfully that the

drive across the bridge in a taxi with Michael would have been much more exciting than ships, and sea, and stars.

With a little sigh she wished she hadn't run quite so fast to catch the last boat home.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PEGGY found, as the Monday night's performance drew to a close, that her enthusiasm for the meeting with Cora at the Three Blind Mice had completely vanished. Not for the world, however, would she allow Michael to dream that she now saw her much-vaunted plan in its true light as childishly futile. What useful purpose was it likely to achieve? She'd been completely insane, thought Peggy miserably, to imagine any good could result from it as far as Michael was concerned. It was much more likely that she was urging him on to an enterprise which could only terminate in disaster and humiliation for them both.

The man her father had dug up, and who was to meet them at the cabaret, she designated in her own mind as a thoroughly nasty piece of work. Why on earth had she ever persuaded Michael to embark on such a crazy adventure?

It was a very wet night, and Michael bundled her into a taxi, disregarding her protests that the tram would put them out almost at the door and that a taxi was an unnecessary extravagance.

Nevertheless, as they sped up William Street, where the wet roadway gleamed like a multi-coloured river, reflecting vividly all the rainbow hues of the neon lights, she was thankful for the privacy afforded by the car. Her knees were shaking, and she had the greatest difficulty in preserving her usual air of light-hearted optimism. She chattered away to Michael of her early days spent in a tiny Darlington flat.

"King's Cross always fascinates me," she observed. "Mummy used to say it was like a corner of New York—it had atmosphere. Especially at night, with the coloured signs everywhere, and all the fruit-shops and food-shops open till after midnight."

"It certainly has 'atmosphere,'" remarked Michael dryly. "Police raiding gambling dens in high-class flats and so on."

"Oh, I know it's a queer neighbourhood, but on a hot, sunny morning, with all the flower-markets open to the street, and the funny little restaurants, and the interior decorators' shops . . ."

"And the women with no hats on their peroxide heads and feathered slippers on their feet dodging into the delicatessen shops about eleven to buy their breakfast rolls . . ."

"They aren't *all* in bedroom slippers," objected Peggy. "Some of the smartest women from Potts Point and Edgecliff do their shopping in King's Cross. I don't say I want to *live* here, but I think it's rather attractive and amusing sometimes."

Tonight, however, she decided, was certainly *not* one of these occasions! Fervently she wished at this moment that she was miles away from King's Cross, the Three Blind Mice, and Cora Lascelles.

The taxi put them down in a side-street at the door of a large but old and rather shabby-looking mansion. In years gone by this had obviously been the home of some wealthy—and presumably reputable—citizen. Now it was ostensibly a 'Residential,' but everyone knew that the Three Blind Mice night-club occupied the greater number of its rooms. The whole of the ground floor was given up to the supper and dancing saloons, but in the flats above particular patrons of the club—

those alone who could be trusted not to give information to the police—might play pontoon, poker, or roulette.

Neither Cora Lascelles, nor the man who had promised to identify her, had arrived when Michael and Peggy took their places at the small reserved table and gave their supper order. But the place was already well filled, and amongst the crowd Peggy noticed Joan Walsh with a party which included Pat Earnshaw.

The latter had obviously had far more to drink than was good for him, but as the whole party were inclined to be hilarious, his noisy shouts of laughter, and stupid horse-play, passed almost unnoticed in the general uproar.

Michael and Peggy ate and danced, and still there was no sign of the two they waited for. Cravenly Peggy prayed that one of them at least might not turn up. She hadn't the remotest idea of what Michael intended to do if they did, and hadn't dared to ask him.

It was now well after midnight. "I don't believe Cora's party is coming after all," remarked Peggy, struggling to disguise the hopefulness of her tone, but just as she uttered the words—almost as though they were the cue for Cora's entrance, she thought bitterly—Harry Brooks and his wife, together with three or four other people, came into the room and sat down at a large reserved table near at hand.

Within another few minutes Peggy's heart sank still further. Here now was the fat, red-faced man who had promised to uphold Michael's contention of having seen Cora at the Korala. Glancing quickly about him, he located Peggy and Michael, crossed over to them, accepted the double whiskey Michael managed to secure for him, and listened as Michael, rather tersely, explained what was required of him.

"I'm not going ter get meself involved in any riot, yer know," observed the red-faced man. "I'll tell Cora I seen 'er with Vickers once at the Korala. No 'arm in that so long as Brooks don't fly off the 'andle over it. Just as well, p'raps, to keep Vickers' name out of it, though."

"Who's Vickers?" queried Michael sharply.

"He's a chap from Melbourne Cora used to run round with before she married Brooks."

"A dark, thick-set man?"

"That's 'im."

Michael drew a deep breath. "And she was with him that night you saw her? About three years ago?"

"That's right. But don't forget—no funny business over this."

"All you've got to do to earn your fiver is to add your testimony to mine as to Miss Lascelles having once visited the Korala. That isn't likely to lead to any trouble, is it?" He drew out a five-pound note from his wallet. "If you don't want the money . . ."

"I can always make use of a fiver. Hand it over."

"Not yet," said Michael. "You've got to earn it first."

"Bit awkward, butting into their party, ain't it?"

"Not at all. She knows me. I'm in the show with her. You stay here, Peggy, and hold the prize-money." He turned to the red-faced individual. "Just stroll over with me now. There's no reason why Miss Lascelles should deny having been at the Korala, is there?"

"Not that I can see. But I don't get the 'ang of this quite. What I don't understand is why you're so anxious to . . ."

"It's to settle a bet," returned Michael briefly. "Come on."

Somewhat reluctantly the red-faced man rose and fol-

lowed Michael across to the other table at which Cora sat. Peggy moved her chair a little nearer so that above the hubbub of the room she might perhaps, by listening intently, hear what was taking place.

At first she could distinguish nothing. Cora, she could see, was looking both furiously angry and arrogant. Then fear showed in her face as Brooks turned to her, regarding her intently. His saturnine expression was more pronounced than ever.

Suddenly Peggy heard one word from him. It was spoken with a sort of hiss. "*Vickers!*"

Cora's voice had risen. Only scraps of what she was saying reached Peggy. "Lies . . . a pair of blackmailing swine . . . have them chucked out . . ."

Brooks got up from his chair. It was obviously not the 'blackmailing swine' who were engaging his attention, but his own wife. He seemed to Peggy like some great dark vulture about to swoop down upon the terrified and shrinking woman. "It's you who've lied to me—damn you!"

Cora made one effort to raise her head, then covered her face with her hands and sobbed hysterically. The attention of many of the dancers was becoming focussed on the scene taking place between Brooks and his wife. Then into a second's quiet came a foul-shouted epithet from Brooks. With his left hand he swung his wife up out of her chair, and as glasses crashed to the ground, he raised his right hand to strike her.

But Michael was too quick for him. Darting in between the two, he caught the full force of the blow and closed with Brooks.

In a second the whole room was in an uproar. Above the half-stifled screams of the women Peggy heard the yell of one excited voice, and saw Pat Earnshaw, now

very drunk, brandishing an empty bottle shoulder-high and cheering on the combatants.

Simultaneously with Brooks' grip on his wife, the red-faced man had scrambled through the crowd to Peggy, seized the five-pound note, and disappeared. Peggy herself was scarcely conscious of his coming or his going. All her horrified attention was concentrated on the battle now in progress.

It lasted for a few moments only. About a dozen men had seized Brooks and were endeavouring to placate him.

Michael, shaking himself free, staunched the blood from his cut cheek with his handkerchief, but no one was paying any attention to him. All were gathered round the weeping Cora and her husband.

Peggy caught one glimpse of Brooks' face. It was now dead white, but perfectly calm. He even achieved a smile of sorts, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. There was something secretive and menacing in it. 'He looks more devilish now than he did before,' thought Peggy swiftly, as she clutched at Michael's arm. "Let's get out quickly, Michael."

"I haven't paid my bill."

"Damn the bill. I've left a pound on the table. Come quickly. The police may be in at any moment. You can't afford to be mixed up in this."

At the first hint of trouble the doorkeeper had closed the outer entrance and rushed into the dancing-room, but the door was only fastened by an inner lock, and Michael, opening it, pushed Peggy forward and swung it to behind him. Peggy, with no thought of the new satin shoes which she was ruining on the muddy pavements, dashed along through the rain at Michael's side, but at last, in one of the more brightly-lighted streets,

he hailed a taxi, and within less than three minutes of the beginning of the fracas the two who had been the cause of it were speeding down towards the Harbour Bridge.

"So that's that!" said Michael. "A hell of a mess we're in now, Peggy. We've accomplished nothing, and tomorrow we'll both be fired."

"We mayn't be," returned Peggy. "And even if we are—fired, I mean—we *have* accomplished something. We've got another name—Vickers. And more than that—don't laugh at me, Michael, and say it's just guesswork on my part—but I believe I know now the name of the young man who really killed Davis. It's Pat Earnshaw."

"What on earth makes you think . . ."

"When you were grappling with Harry Brooks, Earnshaw was shouting at the top of his voice: '*Up there, Gazely! Up there, Gazely!*' Why shouldn't it have been Pat Earnshaw that night at the Korala?"

"It sounds too easy, Peg."

"It may be easy to guess, but it won't be so easy to prove," she returned shrewdly. "Michael, this is where we *must* employ a professional detective. Someone will have to get hold of Vickers too. You'll *have* to borrow money from me if you haven't got enough yourself."

"Take your savings and chuck them away when tomorrow you may be out of a job? No, thank you, Peg! I'd rather never find out who killed Davis than do that."

Over the bridge and all the way to 'Avalon' they continued to argue on this subject. But nothing Peggy could say would shake Michael's determination not to accept money from her. "Haven't I allowed you to do far too much for me already?" he asked. "Tonight, for instance. I'm afraid I've cooked your goose for you

properly. Cora won't have either of us in the theatre with her after what's happened."

"But it was *I* who persuaded you into this silly stunt. It'll be me you'll have to blame for losing *your* job."

"You got it for me in the first place."

"Oh, we're just going round in circles!" exclaimed Peggy desperately. She was now almost in tears. "The truth is you don't care enough about me to feel happy under any obligation to me."

"Don't I?" said Michael in a somewhat peculiar voice.

The taxi was slowing down as it approached the 'Avalon' gate.

"I care a damn sight too much—and I've no right to care. I can't ask you to starve with me. Oh, hell!" Suddenly he took Peggy in his arms and kissed her. Nothing brotherly about *this* kiss!

"'Ere you are!" said the taxi driver. "Avalon!" Tactlessly he switched on the inner light and further privacy was denied them.

Michael pushed open the door and stood on the wet pavement to help Peggy out. She clung to his hand for a moment. "Michael," she whispered. "I'd rather starve with you than live in luxury without you. Because, you see . . . I love you. Good-night."

In another second she had passed through the rusty gate and was speeding along the garden path towards the old darkened house.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE sun was high and hot over 'Avalon,' and the maids were already taking round the seven o'clock tea, when Peggy at last fell asleep. It seemed to her, however, less than five minutes later when she awoke to find Mrs. Armitage standing by her bedside.

"Goodness! what's the time?" she exclaimed.

"It's not quite ten," said Kathleen, "but they're ringing up from the theatre for you. They say it's most important. Slip on a dressing-gown and answer the telephone in my room."

Recollection of all last night's happenings returned to Peggy's sleep-dazed mind, clearing it instantly. Now for the father and mother of a row with the management, her 'notice,' and Michael's too! Awful to be out of work again! But never mind! Michael cared—he cared! Nothing else in the world mattered but that.

"I know what it is," she observed to Kathleen with a little grimace. "Cora Lascelles has complained about us—Michael and me—and we're both being given our notice. What time did Joan get in, I wonder? She was there."

"Where?"

"At the Three Blind Mice. I'll tell you all about it as soon as I've answered the phone."

But when Kathleen met her flying back to her room a few minutes later with a white, scared face it was a different story she had to tell. "Something awful's happened," she gasped. "Cora's in hospital. I've got to play tonight."

"Peggy! What luck!"

"Oh, but it isn't," wailed Peggy, who was now back in her room snatching at her bath-towel. "I *must* catch the ten-twenty boat, Mrs. Armitage. Harry Brooks tried to shoot her. He's killed himself."

"Good Heavens, Peggy!"

"It must have been early this morning in their own flat. Oh, Mrs. Armitage, I feel it's all my fault! If Cora dies I'll be a murderess." Peggy suddenly buried her face in her bath-towel and burst into tears.

"Now, Peggy, pull yourself together," said Kathleen firmly. "If you've got to go on for that part tonight you're not to begin the day by getting hysterical. I'm going to send you up some coffee and toast and you're to eat it as you dress, do you hear? Hurry up and get your bath."

Soon after half-past ten Peggy reached the theatre. She was calmer now, for as she dressed Kathleen Armitage had talked to her sensibly and kindly. Had pointed out that though she might have been responsible for the scene on the previous evening, she could not by any stretch of the imagination blame herself for what had subsequently happened. That was probably merely the result of Cora's own duplicity and her husband's jealousy. Michael had every right to demand the truth from Cora Lascelles. How was he to guess that his endeavour to make her speak would result in tragedy? And it wasn't even certain—though, of course, it sounded remarkably likely—that the shooting affray was the outcome of the scene earlier at the Three Blind Mice. Peggy herself had often said that the Brooks' disagreements were suspected of being characterized by violence. All she had to think of now was doing the best for the management and playing the part well that night.

On the stage the whole company were gathered, and chattering together in a state of intense excitement. The orchestra were in their places and tuning their instruments. Men and women might quarrel and die by violence. But still the 'show' must go on!

Though everyone talked of the tragedy, no one seemed to have a very clear idea of what had happened. Blythe, however, informed Peggy that he had just had word from the hospital that Cora was now considered out of danger. She had been operated on at eight o'clock; apparently the shooting had only taken place shortly before the Brooks' 'daily' maid had entered the flat at seven that morning. It would be weeks, presumably, before Cora could play again, and where they were to find another leading woman to fill her place Blythe was damned if he knew. Peggy must do the best she could with the part in the meantime.

"Quiet, *please!*" shouted Blythe to the chattering crowd on the stage. "Last verse of the chorus before Gina's first entrance."

The chorus grouped themselves in their accustomed places, the orchestra struck up, and the rehearsal began. Blythe had informed Peggy that this was a first run through for dialogue, business, and songs.

In less than an hour this first run through was ended. Peggy had not missed a cue nor 'fluffed' a line. From the moment she knew she was to understudy Cora she'd worked on the part with determination, and at the previous understudy rehearsals she had been word-perfect.

"O.K.," shouted Blythe. "Ten minutes intermission. Get into your practice dress, Peggy, and you, too—who is it doing the cabaret dance with Denning? You, Tiny?"

"Yes, Mr. Blythe."

"We'll be taking the cabaret scene right through."

"Yes, Mr. Blythe."

Peggy hurried away to change. There had been no opportunity as yet for a word with Michael.

At the second run through she had gained self-confidence; felt much more that she really *was* Gina, the poor little street-arab who eventually blossoms out into a world-famous ballerina.

As soon as the rehearsal was over Blythe crossed to her and patted her on the shoulder. "Play the part as well tonight as you've done this morning and you won't let the show down. Now run up to the wardrobe and get Mrs. Fleming to fit your frocks. She says they'll only need taking in and shortening a bit. Then get home and *rest*. I've told Gaynor to keep the orchestra well down for your numbers—the songs, I mean. Your voice isn't anything like as powerful as Cora's, but it'll get over all right. So don't worry about that—don't worry about anything. Just go for it, baby, and you'll be O.K."

With that she was dismissed. She looked round for Michael. He was lingering for a moment in the wings near the stage-door alleyway. "Good luck, Peggy," he said. "You're going to give a better show than Cora could even dream about."

"Oh, Michael, I feel so awful over it all! As though I were to blame! If I hadn't persuaded you to tackle her last night . . ."

"Nonsense! This would probably have happened sooner or later in any case. They say she's out of danger. And she's rid of her precious husband. If what your red-faced friend and I said to her was responsible for the shooting we've probably done her a damn good

turn. Don't worry your head any further about it Concentrate on the part."

"Peggy!"

"Yes, Mr. Blythe?"

"Come here a moment."

"Good-bye, Michael. I'm jealous of Tiny dancing with you."

"You needn't be."

"Peggy!" Blythe's voice was irritable and impatient. Peggy ran forward to him without another word to Michael.

For the rest of the day she had no thought for anyone—not even for Michael. Her whole mind was engaged with the prospect of the ordeal before her. Would she suddenly be attacked by stage-fright and dry up? Would she sing out of tune? Had she memorized completely the dance routines?

Though she lay down in her little room at 'Avalon' she could not sleep. Thud, thud, thud, went her heart as fear and excitement shook her. Out in the garden the hot sun beat down on the sun-dried grass and flower-beds. Beyond the grey rocks of the point the north-easter whipped up small lines of white on the blue of the harbour, and across the water against the sky towered up the high great buildings of the city.

Sun, wind, and water. Peggy lay thinking of them for some time. For thousands upon thousands of years before Peggy Vincent was born, across this lonely land-locked harbour the north-easters had sent running before them their little white horses. And for thousands and thousands of years after she was dead the sun would shine and the wind would blow. What did it matter, after all, whether one insignificant little mortal made a success or a dire failure on the stage tonight?

Peggy endeavoured to calm herself with the thought of time and space and her own small, unimportant part in the mystery of the universe. But nothing could still her beating heart, nor dissipate the sensation of a sick emptiness in regions of her anatomy not quite so romantic as the heart.

Yet when she reached her dressing-room, where nearly a score of telegrams wishing her luck awaited her, and, sitting at her dressing-table, began the familiar operation of making-up, her fears suddenly left her.

Ella, the dresser, informed her that word had come through that Miss Lascelles was progressing splendidly. Neither of the bullets, which had been extracted, had left more than flesh wounds, and no complications were feared. Peggy felt—in spite of Ella's continual and rather gloating chatter over the tragedy—that she might now dismiss Cora from her mind. All she had to do was to think of Gina.

The round of applause from a sympathetic audience which greeted her first entrance for a moment disconcerted her. She wasn't accustomed to a 'reception.' But after that she managed to forget the audience and was merely Gina. Gina, the pathetic little waif of the first act whose passionate love of dancing was to carry her on to fame and fortune.

At the conclusion of the performance all her fellow choristers crowded round her. "You were lovely, Peggy!" "Perfectly swell!" "Marvellous!"

None of these enthusiastic comments carried much weight with her. They would be bound to say complimentary things. It was Blythe's approval she was waiting for, and eventually it came. "A damned good performance, baby. Keep it up a bit more in the ball-room scene. A little more devil to it." There were one

or two other comments he had to make, but she knew that he was pleased, and her heart was filled with thankfulness.

He had not allowed any flowers to be handed up over the footlights, but in her room Peggy found that Kathleen, Charlie Moss, Craig, Dantry, and others had remembered her, and sent their offerings from the florist's.

One large bunch of roses, handed in to her as she was removing her make-up, had a note attached to it. A note in Michael's handwriting.

'Peggy, my dear,' she read. 'You've made a grand success. I knew you would. You'll be a star from now onwards. And being a star, you'll swim far away up over the head of the poor down-and-outer you've helped so much. Forget what I said to you in the taxi last night. We were both, I'm afraid, a trifle excited by the events of the evening. We can still, I hope, remain friends, but though you've a far greater knowledge of the stage than I have, it hasn't taken me long to realize the snobbery of this profession. Principals are in a world apart from the chorus and small-part people. You wouldn't feel this way, I know—you'd always be loyal to your friends—but, believe me, my child, it will be much wiser if we're not seen quite so much together in the future as we have been in the past. In any case, I mean that it shall be so. You'll have all Australia at your pretty little feet now, my dear, and I don't intend to allow a detrimental to impede your triumphal progress. We've had good fun together, and I shall always be grateful to you. But we've come to the end of our road together. Cheerio. Best of luck. Yours. Michael.'

Peggy read this note through a second time, then quietly folded it up and placed it in her bag.

CHAPTER XXX

MICHAEL'S prophecy proved correct. To outshine the star is every understudy's ambition. Seldom, however, is this ambition realized. In Peggy's case the dice had been loaded for her, not against. She was a far more accomplished dancer than Cora. She was younger, and the part of the eager little gamin fitted her like a glove. Something in her small, ardent face, her genuine touch of pathos in the opening scene, went straight to the hearts of those in front. As one man expressed it to Craig: "When that poor little kid danced to the barrel-organ, I felt a lump in my throat—and that's a bit unusual in a musical comedy. But it's what gets you—the touch of reality."

"Personally I think she's better than the girl who played it in London—Wendy something or other. It's little Vincent's part. I can't think why the management didn't realize that from the jump."

Far from realizing it, even after the first night, the management were busily hunting for another leading lady to take Cora's place. It was only after Peggy's enthusiastic notices in the Press, and the substantial rise in the receipts at the theatre, that it began to dawn upon those responsible for the production that by incredible luck they had lighted upon a real box-office draw.

Peggy's salary was increased, but not to any abnormal extent, and she was signed on as Gina for the run of the play, both in Sydney and in Melbourne.

Amidst all the excitement of success—the interviews, the requests for sittings from photographers, the 'fan'-

mail she received—Peggy kept her head. She was enjoying her sudden rise to fame enormously, though more than anything else she enjoyed playing Gina at six evening performances weekly and two matinées. She loved the part and lived in it.

At first, with so much to think about—so many calls upon her time outside the theatre—the fact that she was seeing less of Michael was no more than a little annoying consequence of her growing popularity. A quiet talk alone with him would soon put matters right. He'd *said* he cared for her. It couldn't have been merely, as he put it in his letter, that they were both excited that night after the scene at the Three Blind Mice.

But as time went on, and still the opportunity for that quiet talk did not present itself, Peggy began to entertain doubts. He greeted her always in the most cheery and friendly fashion, but there was no hint in his behaviour to lead her to believe that he cherished any more ardent feeling for her.

And then, after she had been playing the part for some time, she learned—from Kathleen, not from Michael himself—that Peter Craig had offered the young man a job in his office, and that Michael had accepted it, and was terminating his engagement with *Dancing Mad*.

Although she let no one—not even her beloved Mrs. Armitage—know it, Peggy was deeply hurt. Surely she was the one to have been told before anyone else of his change of plans.

Kathleen, delighted as she was at Peggy's phenomenal rise to stardom, had little time to devote to other people's affairs. Her own were going just about as badly as possible. Mrs. Montgomery and John were back from their country holiday—both much improved in

health. But the expenses of John's illness, and the bills incurred for the wretched hot-water system at 'Avalon,' had been infinitely greater than she expected.

Added to this was the fact—only just discovered—that she was expected to pay twenty-five per cent. interest on her bill-of-sale instead of the fifteen per cent. she was almost positive she had agreed upon.

She realized now that she had behaved like a perfect fool over this bill-of-sale. In the first place, negotiating it through a strange solicitor without having more than a very hazy idea as to what constituted a bill-of-sale, beyond the fact that it entitled her to borrow money on the security of her furniture; and in the second place, signing it in a flurry of embarrassment.

Ought she to go now to Gordon Bates? A little late in the day this would be—rather like locking the stable door after the horse was stolen—and she'd have to put her pride in her pocket to do it. Better see Morton Roberts first and ask him for an explanation. There was probably some mistake which could be quite easily rectified.

Some time passed before Kathleen could make up her mind what to do, then one afternoon, having rung up for an appointment, she crossed to the city and made her way to Roberts' office.

To Mrs. Montgomery she had made the excuse of looking round the shops to see what bargains were offered at the summer sales.

So far she had managed to conceal from her mother the exceedingly precarious state of her finances, and of the bill-of-sale she had told no one. If the crash came—if she were sold up at 'Avalon'—she would have to endeavour to get a housekeeper's job in the country; at a station, perhaps, where she could have John with her;

and Mrs. Montgomery's own tiny annuity must suffice to keep her in a bed-sitting-room in town, or perhaps it would be possible for her to share a small flat with Mrs. Simpson or one of her old friends.

And if Kathleen herself were earning a fair salary she could contribute a trifle towards her mother's expenses.

John, of course, would have to go to a State school where he would receive free education. In one of these country schools he'd at least mix with decent children, but not with the same class of boys with whom he was friendly now.

'Don't be a snob, Kathleen,' she told herself when she felt a bitter anticipatory pang at this reflection. 'And don't be a coward. You're not the first woman who's had to face misfortune of this kind. And don't cross your bridges before you come to them.'

Unfortunately it seemed from the outset of her interview with Mr. Roberts that her first bridge was very near at hand.

The solicitor quite suavely informed her that she certainly *had* agreed to pay twenty-five per cent. for the borrowed money, and that his client unfortunately was himself pressed for ready cash.

If the interest could not be met proceedings must be taken immediately. And the 'proceedings,' Kathleen learned, would necessitate a forced sale of all her 'Avalon' furniture, the dismissal of her guests—in fact, the 'crash.'

"Couldn't you prevail upon your client to give me a little further time, Mr. Roberts?" Kathleen knew that, in spite of her resolve to be brave, her voice was shaking. "It means so much to me. If my furniture is taken from me, my living goes. And I never understood the interest was to be twenty-five per cent. That seems abnormally

high. I'd never have consented to it, I'm sure. I certainly understood you to say it was to be fifteen per cent."

"Here is the document duly signed by you," returned Roberts coldly. In his hand was a folded paper. All Kathleen saw was her own signature and a specified interest—twenty-five per cent.—to which she had obviously agreed. "You have until next Monday, Mrs. Armitage," said Roberts now. "I'm sure you'll be able to find the money somewhere. Good-afternoon."

The interview was ended. Rather blindly Kathleen stumbled out. The door of Mr. Roberts' private room had somehow blown ajar. She closed it behind her, and as she did so collided with a weather-beaten but well-dressed elderly man who stood without. "I'm so sorry," she murmured, "I'm afraid I didn't see you."

"It was my fault. The door wasn't shut and I was going in. Then I heard voices . . ."

He moved beside her through the outer office. To Kathleen's horror and discomfiture she suddenly realized that she was crying. Thank Heaven the enquiry clerk's stool was empty—there was no one but this old man to witness her humiliation.

"You're in trouble?" he shot out at her gruffly. A totally unnecessary remark, thought Kathleen bitterly. One didn't cry for fun!

But in spite of his abrupt and somewhat hectoring tone some instinct told her that the old man was endeavouring to be kind. She controlled her sobs and managed to achieve a watery smile. "Money troubles are disagreeable, but we're lucky if they're the only ones we have to face," she answered.

"H'm!" said the old man. They had reached the street entrance. "Shall I call a taxi for you?"

Kathleen's smile was a trifle more natural now. "Not exactly the best way to begin facing one's monetary worries—paying taxi fares—is it?" she asked. "I've two perfectly good feet. I'll walk, thanks. Good-bye." Without another glance in his direction she set off swiftly along the street.

The old man watched her for a moment, then walked back through the office and into Moreton Roberts' private room.

"Good Heavens, Uncle! You seem determined to take me by surprise!" exclaimed the solicitor, looking up and immediately assuming his sudden Carkerish smile. "I'd no idea you were in town again."

'Old Sam' regarded his nephew a trifle oddly. "Who was the woman in here just now?" he asked abruptly.

"A Mrs. Armitage."

"She seemed upset. What was the trouble?"

"The usual thing. These women borrow money and then haven't the slightest scruple in endeavouring to evade the payment of interest due."

"Twenty-five per cent. seems uncommonly like usury."

For a second Roberts looked startled, then he regained complete composure. "She told you that?" he enquired in an amused tone.

"No. As a matter of fact, Moreton, I didn't realize there was anyone in here with you. The door was unlatched, and I couldn't help overhearing something that was said. From whom did she borrow that money?"

"From one of my clients."

"I didn't think a reputable solicitor would act for any client who exacted the interest of a blood-sucking money-lender."

"That's rather strong language, surely," Roberts

smiled deprecatingly. "A solicitor is bound to do the best he can for his clients, you know."

"H'm," said McDowell. "Apparently, from what I inadvertently overheard, she wasn't borrowing without security. She mentioned furniture."

"Oh, my dear Uncle." Roberts waved his well cared-for hands as though to dismiss the subject. "If I took seriously every stupid excuse by which borrowers seek to evade . . ."

McDowell went on without paying the smallest attention to his nephew's remark. "If the money was borrowed on a bill-of-sale, how is it that this Mrs. Armitage wasn't aware of the rate of interest? She had her copy of the document, I presume?"

Roberts shrugged his shoulders. "But of course. My dear Uncle, why worry your head over a defaulting . . ."

"I'd very much like to know the name of this Shylock of a client of yours."

Roberts looked gravely regretful. "Solicitors and doctors are in honour bound not to reveal professional secrets."

"I see. Oh, well, it's of no consequence. I only looked in to tell you that they require some of the old original survey maps of Koolandra at the Lands Office. Send them along as soon as possible, will you?" He rose.

"You're not going back to the country immediately, are you? We shall see something of you, I hope? Adele and Cedric were terribly disappointed that you couldn't dine with us last time you were in town."

"I'll let you know," said 'Old Sam.' With an abrupt nod to his nephew, he strode out of the office.

Having gained the pavement, he stood for a moment frowning and deep in thought. Then he raised his stick

and hailed a taxi. "To the Registrar-General's office," he said.

For the sum of one shilling he could find there all the information Moreton Roberts had denied him, inspect a copy of this bill of sale against which Mrs. Armitage had borrowed money at such exorbitant interest, and learn the name of the solicitor's usurious client.

Why this should be so important to him he wouldn't yet allow himself to ask.

Only when he saw in black and white the incontrovertible evidence of his nephew's duplicity—realized that the client referred to was none other than Moreton Roberts himself—did he draw a deep breath, and admit that a steadily growing suspicion of his nephew's dishonesty had driven him on.

"The damned liar. What sort of a fool did he take me for?" he muttered. And then the uncomfortable reflection that Moreton Roberts had every reason for believing him a fool obtruded itself. Hadn't he managed to gull him—hard-headed Sam McDowell—for any number of years? If dishonest in this instance, why not dishonest in all?

And if dishonest, mightn't Michael's contention that he had been unfairly treated by his solicitor during his trial have some foundation? Not that that in itself proved Michael's innocence of the charge laid against him, but mightn't it in some degree discount those hints and innuendoes Moreton had so often thrown out as to Michael's habits of dissipation and his general instability and untrustworthiness?

'Old Sam' was not given to introspection, yet now, endeavouring to look deep into his own heart, he wondered whether some long-buried jealousy of his beloved

Molly's interest in her boy hadn't unfairly influenced him against the lad.

Kathleen Armitage! 'Avalon!' Those names together struck a cord of memory.

She was the woman Michael had spoken of that day at Koolandra.

Contrasting her attractive face—her clear, candid eyes, and the charm of that brave attempt to smile away her tears—with the face of his nephew Moreton Roberts, McDowell knew which of the two he would rather trust.

From Kathleen Armitage, at any rate, he was convinced he'd get the truth concerning his grandson.

CHAPTER XXXI

THOUGH Kathleen had managed to regain her self-control in bidding farewell to the grim, elderly man at the door of Moreton Roberts' office, she found as she thought of the ruin that threatened to engulf her that her tears flowed afresh. This was absurd and weak; crying wouldn't put matters right. Only fifty pounds in cash, discovered miraculously within the next four days, could help her round this difficult corner—give her at least a little breathing space.

But how was she to come by fifty pounds? Her bank manager had already reminded her politely that it would be advisable to reduce her overdraft; Gordon Bates could certainly not be expected to advance the money without security; her only hope was to borrow from a friend.

How could she borrow, thought Kathleen bitterly, when in common honesty she would be forced to admit that she could hold out no hope of repayment unless her affairs took a sudden and very unexpected turn for the better.

She would not consider the possibility of applying to Peter for a loan. She wouldn't! She wouldn't!

Yet she hesitated at the corner of the street in which his office lay, and then, almost without knowing she was doing so, found herself walking quickly towards it.

Yes, replied the clerk in answer to her enquiry, Mr. Craig was in, but he'd given orders that he could see no callers this afternoon. He was expecting a friend at

any moment now. They were going together into the country on business.

Kathleen was conscious of a surge of relief. She'd been mad to come to this office. She *couldn't* ask Peter. . . .

She turned swiftly to depart, and as she did so an inner door opened and she heard Craig's voice. "Kathleen! What on earth brings you here?"

"I was passing . . ." she began lamely. "But I hear you're just off to the country."

"Miles—Dennis Miles—is calling for me, but come in a moment."

"Oh, no. Some other time."

For answer he placed one hand beneath her elbow and propelled her gently but firmly towards his own room. "Do as you're told." Closing the door marked 'Private' behind them, he continued cheerfully: "I can't let you run away like a scared rabbit when you do me the honour to . . ." Suddenly his voice changed. He was eyeing her narrowly. "Kathleen, you've been crying."

"Oh, no," she answered, lying brightly. "Some dust . . ."

"Anything wrong with John?"

She shook her head. "Both he and mother are really very well now. John should be able to return to school next month." Return to school? Would he? With last term's fees still unpaid?

"Then what is it? You're in trouble of some sort. Money?"

She made one effort to speak, but was able to form no words. Why, oh, why had she come here to expose herself to such bitter humiliation? She mustn't cry again! She mustn't! Yet, in spite of this resolve, and her hard-bitten lip, a smothered sob escaped her.

Craig moved quickly over to her, and passed one arm about her shoulders as she sat at his table struggling for self-control. "If it's only money," he said kindly, "there's nothing to worry about. I'm sure I can fix matters up for you—if it doesn't run into thousands."

"No," she said, with a wan little smile, "it doesn't run into thousands. But I don't know when I could pay you back, Peter."

"We needn't discuss that. How much do you want?"

"If you could let me have . . . fifty pounds."

"Fifty? My poor child! Is all this agitation necessary for a trifling sum like that." The buzzer sounded on his table. Kathleen was thankful for the interruption. Craig removed his arm from her shoulder to answer the summons. "All right. Ask him to wait a moment."

He put down the receiver. "Dennis is outside—waiting for me. I'll have to go now, my dear, but in the meantime . . ." He pulled out his cheque-book and rapidly filled up a form. "I'm making this out for a hundred, and you're not to think any more about it. When I get back from the country next week we'll talk over your affairs and get them straight. Until then, promise me you won't worry any more."

"I can't thank you enough, Peter," she said brokenly.

"You've nothing to thank me for. I'm damned angry with you for upsetting yourself over a small matter like this without coming to me in the first instance. What's the use of money if we can't help our friends occasionally? We *are* friends, Kathleen, aren't we?"

"You know we are, Peter. You've always been . . ."

"Been what?"

"Very dear to me."

"Well, that's something, at any rate. I didn't think I

was once—that day when I met your mother and she told me you'd decided to marry Armitage, without giving me the vaguest hint . . .”

“Peter!” She was staring at him with wide eyes, but he, busily collecting papers from his table, failed to see the amazed bewilderment in her face.

“All right! All right!” he went on. “I’m not cherishing a bygone grievance against you. You’d probably have told me yourself later, but I was too sore to give you a chance to explain. I must go. Stay here until I’ve taken Dennis off. You’ll want to powder your poor little nose. No more tears, Kathleen. Money troubles aren’t worth them. Good-bye.”

With another pat to her shoulder he was gone, and Kathleen was left staring at the cheque she held. But although this cheque represented reprieve and security for at least another few weeks, her thoughts were more engaged with that remark of Peter’s concerning her mother than with her own money troubles.

Mrs. Montgomery must certainly have said *something* to Peter all those years ago, but what? Peter, who was no fool, wouldn’t be likely to have misconstrued any ambiguous allegation. He wasn’t the sort of person to be fobbed off with hints and innuendoes. Nothing less than a definite statement would convince him.

Back to Kathleen’s mind came the recollection of having read somewhere that those we have deliberately injured we hate.

Mrs. Montgomery undoubtedly hated Peter Craig—had done so long before his marriage and his subsequent association with Jessie Deans. Was it possible, thought Kathleen, that her own mother had lied to Peter? If so, could she, Kathleen, ever find it in her heart to forgive her?

Placing the cheque in her bag, Kathleen rose. The banks would be closed for today, but she could pay in the cheque first thing in the morning. Meanwhile there was something else she must do. She must find out from her mother the truth of what had happened nearly twenty years ago.

The level rays of the sinking sun lay over the city and the wide blue harbour, bathing in a hot, glowing radiance the wooded shores of the Domain and the towering blocks of flats across the water, as Kathleen left the crowded ferry and mounted the grey stone steps leading up from the wharf to 'Avalon.'

Mrs. Montgomery, busily engaged upon a pile of household mending in Kathleen's small sitting-room, looked up anxiously as her daughter entered. "I hope you haven't tired yourself, Kathleen, my dear," she said. "It's been a most dreadfully hot day."

How was one to attack a defenceless old woman? To tax her with a bygone lie?

"I'm tired, certainly," replied Kathleen, "but . . ." she paused for a moment. "Mother, before John proposed to me, did you ever say anything to Peter to lead him to believe I was already engaged?"

Mrs. Montgomery looked up at her daughter in sudden fear. Then a slow dark colour mounted in her lined face, and her eyes dropped once more to the work in her hands. "Why do you ask that . . . now?"

Yes, why did she put so useless a question, thought Kathleen swiftly. Whatever her mother had done in the past, she'd done it with no desire but to secure what she believed to be the ultimate happiness of her much-loved daughter.

Looking down at her mother's pitifully trembling hands, Kathleen knew that her question was answered.

Knew, too, that her anger was gone and pity had replaced it, just as it had done not many months ago when, with futile bitterness, Mrs. Montgomery had endeavoured to prevent her daughter from driving with Peter Craig to Broken Bay.

Kathleen crossed the room and bent to kiss her mother. No useless quarrels should embitter the old lady's last years if she could help it. "I've no doubt you thought you were acting for the best," she said, endeavouring to speak lightly. "Yet perhaps when we attempt to order other people's lives we don't always order them successfully. I might have been happier, you know, with Peter."

Mrs. Montgomery made no answer, and Kathleen said no more. She opened the door quietly and went on to her bedroom to change for dinner.

CHAPTER XXXII

SOME days later Kathleen, having been informed by one of the maids that a gentleman was waiting to see her, found on entering the lounge that she was face to face once more with the gruff old man who had spoken to her in Moreton Roberts' office.

"My name is McDowell," he remarked as he rose to greet her. "Samuel McDowell."

"Yes," said Kathleen. The name conveyed nothing at all to her.

"Perhaps you don't remember me. I met you . . ."

"Of course I remember you. You were awfully kind to me when I was making a complete fool of myself. I don't often behave so idiotically, you know. Have you called about rooms?"

He shook his head impatiently. "Is there anywhere we can talk without fear of interruption?"

"No one is in the least likely to come in here before tea-time. Won't you sit down?"

The old man took the chair Kathleen indicated, and she herself sat down on the Chesterfield near at hand.

"No good beating about the bush," said McDowell abruptly. "I believe you once did my grandson some sort of good turn."

"Your grandson?" Kathleen still looked puzzled.

"Michael Deering."

Kathleen's face cleared immediately, and her sweet, candid smile replaced the look of bewilderment. "But of course I know Michael. I'm extremely fond of him. I don't remember any good turn . . ."

"He remembers it. He spoke of you to me. Do you happen to know where he is now?"

"At this moment I imagine he's either sitting on a stool in Mr. Craig's office or doing the round of the wool stores."

"He's working?"

"He's been working for months—working very hard."

"In this office?"

"Oh, no. I believe he's only just started there. He's written articles for the Press, and has finished a novel and sent it to London. Whether it's accepted or not, it represents work—really *hard* work. And lately he's been appearing in *Dancing Mad*. He only gave that up because the office job seemed likely to be more permanent."

"*Dancing Mad*?" The old man scowled. "On the stage?"

"Don't you approve of the stage?"

"Not for my grandson."

"He was a waiter here with me. Before that he'd been sleeping in the Domain. And before he reached the Domain you yourself know where he was. I don't think a stage engagement can be considered altogether a come-down after those experiences." Kathleen's voice was a trifle dry. So this was the hard old man who had refused to believe Michael's story, who had turned his back on his own flesh and blood in time of trouble.

"I was told he was mixed up with some harpy of an actress," growled the old man.

"A harpy of an actress?" Kathleen looked at him for a moment in frank bewilderment. Then she threw back her head and laughed aloud. "I presume you're referring to Peggy Vincent."

"Never heard her name. I've no knowledge of the creature."

"If you had you certainly wouldn't describe her as a harpy or a 'creature.' She lives here with me. She's one of the dearest little girls I know. Do you happen, by any chance, to have seen *Dancing Mad*?"

He shook his head. "I never go to these absurd musical comedies. Trash—all of them."

"That's a pity. You'd enjoy it."

He waved this aside as irrelevant to the discussion. "Did you find the boy . . . trustworthy . . . when he worked for you?"

"Of course I did. He *is* trustworthy."

"How do you know that?"

"How do we know these things about anyone? By instinct—well, perhaps not altogether by instinct. By our experience of life—the chance we've had of judging our fellows—summing people up. I shouldn't expect you, for instance, to attack me suddenly, or to swindle me out of my money."

"H'm," said the old man. "And how would you sum up Moreton Roberts—your solicitor?"

"He's *not* my solicitor," she answered quickly. "And I wish I'd never seen him. Indirectly it was Michael who was responsible for my going to him."

It was McDowell's turn to open his eyes in surprise. "Michael responsible?"

"Indirectly,' I said. Through Michael having spoken of him to Peggy, and Peggy having mentioned the name to me. If I'd paid more attention to what Peggy told me I'd never have entered his office. Michael considers him a rogue."

"You know he's my nephew?"

"I'm sorry, but I still think him, somehow, shifty."

"Relying on Michael's word or on instinct?"

"On both."

"He negotiated a bill of sale for you?"

"Yes," answered Kathleen, reddening slightly.

"Did he give you a copy of the document?"

"No."

"H'm," said McDowell again. "He told me that he'd done so."

"Then he told you something that wasn't true. I don't quite see what my affairs have got to do with your grandson."

"They've got a good deal to do with him. If Moreton lied over his business with you—and I know he's done that—he probably lied in everything concerning Michael."

"But surely you had enough discrimination to know which of the two you could trust—your nephew or your grandson?"

"We evidently don't all possess your power of instinctive judgment," returned McDowell, a trifle sourly.

Kathleen regarded him in silence for a moment. "Mr. McDowell," she said at last, "I'm going to speak very frankly to you. I can't help it if I offend you. First of all, I think you behaved with extreme harshness to your daughter's son. And though I imagine you've got any amount of common sense, you've displayed precious little in your dealings with Michael. It almost seems as though you *wanted* to believe the worst of him. *Of course* his contention that he wasn't responsible for the death of Davis is the truth . . ."

"Why do you say 'of course'?"

"Because of course it *is*. Michael isn't a liar."

"But he's no proof to support his statement."

"If you were any judge of character you wouldn't require more proof than his word."

"A court of law requires more."

"Naturally it does, and that is where you should have shown your faith in him. You should have *found* the proof, even if it had cost you thousands of pounds to do it. You shouldn't have left it to Michael himself and to Peggy to struggle along and endeavour to track down the witnesses."

"Peggy? Who's Peggy?"

"Peggy Vincent—his very good little friend," explained Kathleen patiently. "I've mentioned her before. I really think you'd better meet her. She's upstairs resting at this moment. She can explain much more clearly than I can how far she and Michael have got with their enquiries. And continuing to be very frank, I think it is up to *you* now to take on this job—to do your utmost to clear Michael's name. A little late in the day, I'll admit, but better late than never. Excuse me just a moment and I'll fetch Peggy."

When five minutes later Kathleen re-entered the room and introduced Peggy, a somewhat uncomfortable pause ensued. 'Old Sam' looked Peggy up and down, but whether she conformed with his idea of a 'harpy' or not Kathleen couldn't tell.

Peggy herself broke the silence. "As you're here to help Michael . . ." she began.

"I didn't say I was," growled McDowell.

"You wouldn't have come unless you'd made up your mind to do something for him," returned Peggy serenely. "So you may as well hear what we've found out so far and how *you* can carry on the good work." She proceeded to tell him all that Michael and she had together discovered; their suspicions as to the name of

the real culprit; and the importance of Cora's testimony.

Miss Lascelles was now well on the way to complete recovery, and might certainly be approached by a private detective without danger to her health. Mr. Vickers should be sought for in Melbourne, and pressure brought to bear on both of them to testify to the identity of the young man who had driven off in Michael's car.

Now that Brooks was dead Cora could have nothing to fear from the revelation of her clandestine meetings with a man who had probably been her lover.

"As you've got it all so pat, why haven't you gone on with your investigations yourselves—you and Michael?" queried the old man shortly.

For a moment Peggy looked a trifle disconcerted. Then she remarked casually that she'd seen very little of Michael lately, but that she didn't believe he had enough ready money to continue the enquiries at present. As for herself, it wasn't her business and he would probably resent it if she took any steps in the affair without his knowledge.

To Kathleen's relief and secret satisfaction Peggy had not carried out her threat of telling 'the hateful old man' just what she thought of him. On the contrary, she was getting on with him extremely well; treating him in as natural and friendly a fashion as she would have treated any one of her numerous male admirers.

Obviously McDowell had now decided that she wasn't a harpy—or that, if she was, she was an extremely amusing one. He smiled more than once at her quick little sallies, and even laughed aloud at her description of how she had 'wangled' Michael into the cast of *Dancing Mad*. When he enquired gruffly what part

she took in the performance, she replied that he had better come and see it and find out for himself, and to Kathleen's surprise he remarked that he would do so that very evening.

He made no definite promise as to what he was prepared to do for his grandson, but before he left he observed abruptly to Kathleen: "If you'll take my advice—although you seem to regard me as a cross between a gorilla and an imbecile—you'll have no further dealings with my nephew. I've removed all my business from his office, and I've let him understand that in future I'll have nothing more to do with him."

"So that's that!" said Peggy as he left. "I wonder how Michael will receive the olive branch. However, it's no concern of mine."

"But, Peggy . . ."

Peggy turned a somewhat flushed face in Kathleen's direction. "The friendship between Mr. Michael Deering and Miss Peggy Vincent is definitely at an end—by mutual consent. I intend now to set my cap at Mr. Samuel McDowell. He's much more interesting than his grandson and a very much better match. I can't think how Michael ever found anything to dislike in him! Personally I consider him a perfect old dear!" And humming a tune from *Dancing Mad*, and with every appearance of light-hearted unconcern, she left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AS a rule Mrs. Armitage visited Peggy for a few moments in her room each morning after Vera had carried up her breakfast tray at nine o'clock. Today Peggy, sitting propped up with pillows and dealing with grape-fruit, coffee, and toast, was eager to relate all that had happened the previous evening.

Not only had Mr. Samuel McDowell attended the performance of *Dancing Mad*, but he had taken the leading lady to the Australia afterwards for coffee and sandwiches, and had driven her home later in his car. The car was to call for her again this morning at ten-thirty, and with 'Old Sam' she was to interview the solicitor to whom he had now transferred his business. Immediate steps would then be taken to procure a statement from Cora Lascelles. If no useful information could be obtained from her, enquiries were to be made concerning Vickers, and all Pat Earnshaw's activities for the past few years were to be checked up.

"I'm *certain* we're on the right track," said Peggy.

"And what happens if you *do* succeed in exonerating Michael?"

Peggy shrugged her pretty lace-draped shoulders. "I suppose Mr. Pat Earnshaw takes his dose of gaol, that is, if my Sherlock Holmes' guess is the correct one."

"And Joan is left lamenting."

"She may have more chance of becoming Mrs. Earnshaw after he's done time," returned Peggy shrewdly. "She certainly hasn't the least chance of landing him at present. And she may get a better bargain if he's

been in a state of compulsory sobriety for twelve months. Sam doesn't believe he'd get more than a year if he confesses and pleads the excuse of drunkenness at the time of the accident."

"Sam?" Kathleen raised her eyebrows, and Peggy flashed a wicked little smile at her.

"Oh, yes, we're Sam and Peggy now. Extremely matey."

"And are you and Sam going together to interview Michael?" asked Kathleen dryly.

At the mention of Michael's name a stiff little mask seemed to be drawn down over Peggy's smile. "I've washed my hands of Michael," she remarked frigidly. "It's only his case I'm interested in—and his grandfather," she added quickly. "Michael didn't even bother to tell me he was leaving *Dancing Mad*, and it was Tiny who informed me that Michael had had a cable about his book.

"Oh, you never told me that!"

"Didn't I? I must have forgotten."

Peggy yawned rather ostentatiously.

"What's happened about it?"

"They're going to publish it, I believe, provided Michael makes a few alterations. Tiny was very full of it. I didn't pay much attention. I'll have to hurry to be ready by ten-thirty."

Peggy had not exaggerated when she remarked that she and 'Old Sam' were now extremely 'matey.' He had taken a great fancy to the little girl when first they met, and her performance of 'Gina' had completed his subjugation.

McDowell had gone to the theatre expecting to see her in some subsidiary rôle. He hadn't even troubled to glance at the programme. When she first appeared

he had been astonished by the loud burst of applause which greeted her; and as the evening wore on his astonishment increased, until this was entirely lost in his interest and admiration of her performance. She was undoubtedly the finest little actress he'd ever seen, 'Old Sam' decided. He didn't stop to consider that he had really seen very few.

But it was not by any means her talent only that attracted him. It was the fact that in some obscure fashion she brought back to him a memory of his own much-loved Molly. Not that there was the slightest physical resemblance between the two. It was merely that neither girl was in the least intimidated nor antagonized by his somewhat dour and sardonic personality. Peggy accepted him as frankly and as naturally as his daughter had done; teased him, and was 'cheeky' just as Molly had been. No other human being but Molly—until he met Peggy Vincent—had possessed the faculty of making him appear to himself not as a hard, grim-visaged old man, but as a remarkably entertaining and quite lovable individual.

The interview with his new solicitor having been satisfactorily concluded—the solicitor being obviously quite as much interested in meeting the little girl who at the present moment was the talk of the town as he was in the case of Michael Deering—"Old Sam" proposed that they should lunch together.

Peggy, however, had a previous engagement. "And you've got to run along and have your talk with Michael," she informed him.

To 'run along' and interview his grandson was by no means an alluring prospect to 'Old Sam.' He'd have to eat humble pie to the boy; for whether it could ever be established that the lad had been wrongfully imprisoned

or not, it was obvious now to McDowell that he himself had not only been severe and harsh, but a fool as well.

"I'll telephone him to meet me at the Australia," he growled.

"He won't come," returned Peggy decidedly. "No, what you've got to do is to call in quite casually at Mr. Craig's office. See Michael, and tell him you're sorry your last interview was unpleasant, and that you want to talk things over once more. Then *perhaps*—I don't say he will for *certain*, remember—but *perhaps* he *may* accept your invitation to lunch."

"In other words, I've got to go to him hat in hand."

"Exactly," said Peggy. "I know it's not pleasant, but it's simply got to be done. It's only the first meeting that will be unpleasant—like a visit to the dentist. But it won't really hurt very much. One jerk and it'll be over, and you'll feel a new man when you've got rid of that nagging tooth."

Michael was alone in the outer room at Craig's office when his grandfather entered.

"Good-morning," began 'Old Sam' abruptly.

After his first glance of incredulous astonishment Michael pulled himself together. "Mr. Craig's out of town at present, if you want to see . . ."

"I don't. Your friend Mrs. Armitage and little Peggy have both been good enough to tell me . . ." he stopped. The tooth was difficult of extraction. "You were quite right about Moreton. I've given him the boot."

Michael's face lit up with a sudden grin. "Good business! I wish I'd been there to see you do it."

"He's a damn scoundrel and I told him so."

Michael's grin widened. "How did you find it out?"

"It's a long story. Come to lunch with me and I'll tell you."

"I'm afraid I can't. I'm in charge here until one-fifteen, when the other clerks come back. Where did you meet Peggy?"

"That's a long story too." Suddenly 'Old Sam' leant over the enquiry counter. "I believe that child's fond of you. Do you mean to marry her?"

Michael reddened. "What have I got to offer her?" he asked angrily. "If you've seen her you know the whole town's at her feet. She could marry anyone."

"Isn't Sam McDowell's grandson good enough for her?"

Michael's flush had faded. "I don't know, I'm sure," he answered quietly. "I haven't asked her."

'Old Sam' thumped the counter in sudden rage. "Damn it all, then, if you won't ask her, I've half a mind to marry her myself."

"I must warn you that she has a somewhat poisonous father."

"What's that got to do with it? You're not marrying the father, are you?"

"I thought it was you, sir, who proposed to do the marrying. Personally I rather like the little man, but I can't quite see him as your father-in-law."

"You're not going to see anyone as my father-in-law, and you know it. You're meeting me at the Australia for lunch in half an hour. Is that clear?"

"Quite, sir," returned Michael. "I'll be there."

With an abrupt nod 'Old Sam' turned and left the office.

The tooth was out.

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN spite of Peggy's assertion that the friendship between Mr. Michael Deering and Miss Peggy Vincent was definitely at an end, the star of *Dancing Mad* raised no objection whatever when two evenings later in her dressing-room she received a message from 'Old Sam' informing her that he expected her to join him and his grandson after the performance, at the Australia.

In fact, Peggy, without the least compunction, instructed her dresser to telephone from the stage-door-keeper's office to a certain number, conveying Miss Vincent's regrets at being unable to be present at a charity ball to which she had been invited and which she had promised to attend if possible.

"Just say, Ella, that I'm most *awfully* sorry, but, after all, I find that I shan't be able to get there. I promised to let them know if I couldn't go."

"And you got that lovely fancy dress for it and all," remarked Ella regretfully. "All them yards and yards of chiffong. Couldn't you wear it and go on to the ball later, Miss? You look a treat as that back auntie, or whatever you call it."

"I don't see myself appearing at the Australia in gauzy draperies and vine leaves, Ella. No, I've got to discuss business tonight. Very important business."

"Oh, well, natcherly, if it's *business*," returned Ella, "you *can't* put it off. Another contract, Miss?"

"It *may* be." Peggy was slipping into her dress for the third act.

Michael had said he'd nothing to offer her. Would he have anything to offer her now that the reconciliation with his grandfather was complete, and he was returning to Koolandra to help the old man in the management of his affairs?

Peggy wouldn't allow herself to think any further than this. At least, in another hour's time she would see Michael again—be with him once more.

It was merely coffee and sandwiches at the Australia. 'Old Sam' had no ideas as to lavish entertainments, even for popular musical-comedy stars.

The loaf of bread and jug of wine, however, which this repast represented was more than enough for Peggy, provided she shared it with Michael Deering.

The two young people greeted each other with a certain chilliness, but the atmosphere soon became less frigid as Peggy responded gaily to 'Old Sam's' salutation.

When they were seated at one of the small tables in the winter garden Michael found that he was again experiencing the pangs of apprehension of which he had been aware in days gone by when his mother had treated her dour old father to some daring impertinence.

Yet after a moment he realized that his apprehension was entirely unnecessary. Realized, too, as he had been unable to realize when a child, that this gay and teasing impudence, this lack of fear—through which shone clearly a genuine affection—pleased 'Old Sam' far more than any formal deference.

And Peggy's bright insouciance had the effect at last of putting Michael also more at ease in his grandfather's presence; for, in spite of the fact that the old wounds were considered to be healed between them, the bridge of complete understanding had not as yet been built.

Certainly McDowell had acted generously as far as

money matters were concerned, and he was prepared to do everything in his power to expedite the investigation being carried out by his solicitor on Michael's behalf.

Already a statement had been secured from Cora Lascelles to the effect that she had seen Michael hotly pursuing some young man in a car from the Korala. Apparently she had taken no further notice of the incident, nor had she realized that this particular car had been responsible for an accident a few minutes later.

This statement in itself did not clear Michael, but at least it corroborated his statement.

It remained to be seen what information could be obtained from Vickers, whom the private detective had located in Melbourne.

When Peggy at last rose to go 'Old Sam' remarked that Michael could take the car and drive her home.

"I can't do that, sir" returned Michael shortly. "You seem to forget that I'm not allowed the possession of a licence. That I never shall be unless . . ."

It was a matter that the old man had completely overlooked, and he scowled, suddenly annoyed at the reminder of his mistake. "You'll have one again before long, never fear," he answered angrily. "Take a taxi, then, tonight. Get along with you. I'm tired and off to bed."

It was inevitable that once in the taxi, and bowling along towards the bridge, the thoughts of both Michael and Peggy should turn to their previous ride together, and to all that had been said then.

But neither seemed inclined to refer to those hurriedly whispered words which preceded their parting in the rain at the 'Avalon' gate. Instead they talked of 'Old Sam,' and of the sudden change in Michael's fortune.

"You don't seem to me to be so frightfully bucked about it all," remarked Peggy suddenly, giving a swift glance into Michael's troubled face. "Everything's going right for you at last. 'Old Sam's' *determined* to get you cleared, and I'm certain that he will. Not that it makes so much difference to you now. You're a rich young man once more, and people will soon forget that you were ever . . . in trouble."

"I shan't forget," returned Michael bitterly. "It's a pity 'Old Sam' has taken three years to make up his mind that I was telling the truth."

"Michael, you told me once that Mrs. Armitage warned you against cherishing grievances. And if you *hadn't* been . . . been down on your luck, we two would never have met."

"I almost wish we never had."

"That's unkind."

"I don't mean to be unkind. Oh, hell, Peggy! Peggy, I . . ."

He broke off abruptly, endeavouring to speak more lightly. "When do you go to Melbourne?"

"In about three weeks now, I think."

"For further triumphs."

"I don't know about triumphs, but you don't grudge me my small spotlight, do you? After all, if we'd never met, I'd never have had it. It all began with your sketch."

"That's absurd! You'd have got to the top of the tree sooner or later, and now you're there you'll stay there."

"Unless I marry."

He laughed shortly. "I can't see you giving up the profession you adore for any man."

"Can't you? I can. Not for any man, but for one

man. Michael . . ." Her voice was suddenly shaken. "You told me once that you were . . . were fond of me. Of course I suppose now you could marry any posh sort of society girl you . . ."

"Society girls be damned," said Michael abruptly. "When I said I cared you weren't a . . . a celebrity. And to ask you to give up a profession you're crazy about just when you've made this big success . . ."

"Haven't I been trying to tell you I'm far more crazy about you? Michael, you aren't going to force *me* to . . . to propose, are you?"

Michael groaned. "You don't know how dull life can be away in the country at Koolandra. You'd never stick it."

"If you were a perfect little gentleman you'd at least ask me to try it. Michael, has my advice to you *ever* been wrong? Even that awful night at the Three Blind Mice turned out to be lucky."

"Very lucky for Brooks and Cora," returned Michael, with a miserable attempt at sarcasm.

"Cora's much better off without that jealous maniac. But I'm not discussing them. It's us. Can't I make Koolandra less dull for you? I shall love being there—learning to ride and flirting with Sam. Michael, my advice to you now is . . ."

Suddenly she moved nearer to him and placed one little hand behind his stubborn head. "At least you might say you'll always be a brother to me, Michael. I'd hate you to be my step-grandson."

For a second he remained rigid. Then he bent towards her and gathered her closely in his arms.

This time there was no light switched on by the taxi driver to disturb their privacy.

CHAPTER XXXV

ONLY Mrs. Armitage and 'Old Sam' were apprised of the engagement. Peggy must fulfil her contract and play the season in Melbourne, and in the meantime Michael would return with his grandfather to Koolandra.

But before the *Dancing Mad* company had finished its triumphant career in Sydney the solicitor employed by 'Old Sam' had succeeded in clearing Michael from the charge of manslaughter and establishing the fact that the real culprit was, as Peggy surmised, Pat Earnshaw.

'Old Sam' was all for claiming compensation for wrongful imprisonment, but he was dissuaded from this course, and all that happened was reported in a few paragraphs in the Press, which passed unnoticed except by those most nearly concerned.

Pat Earnshaw, having pleaded drunkenness and complete forgetfulness of all that had happened between the time of his last drink at the Korala and his awakening in the dawn amongst the thick undergrowth bordering the road near the scene of the accident, was luckier than Michael had been, getting off with a sentence of one year's imprisonment, with the proviso that he entered into a recognizance of five years' good behaviour subsequent to his release.

As no one at 'Avalon' had any cause to connect the Michael Deering mentioned in the papers with Maurice Denning, there was no discussion of the case, save from Clara Walsh, who loudly declared that it was a most iniquitous thing to arrest and imprison a poor young

man who had done no more than drive off in someone else's car when he really wasn't aware of what he was about."

"Poor Joan is *heartbroken*," she declared to Kathleen, "but she's let him know that it won't make the least difference to her, and she's quite willing to wait."

"Were they engaged?" asked Kathleen bluntly.

"Well, I'm sure they had an *understanding*," returned Clara. And Kathleen did not pursue the subject, for she had other things of more importance to herself to occupy her mind.

She had not waited for Peter's return, and the fulfilment of his promise to straighten out her affairs, but had gone at once to Gordon Bates and made a clean breast of everything. Only one fact she withheld—the name of the friend who had come to her rescue with a cheque for one hundred pounds. This, she told Bates, she was anxious to repay as soon as possible.

In her own mind she had decided that she could not face Craig again until there was no question of monetary obligation between them, and in answer to his telephone call she returned an evasive reply, telling him that she was most grateful for what he had done, but for the present she was far too busy to arrange a meeting. Her solicitor had all her business in hand, and hoped very shortly to relieve her of her small temporary embarrassments.

Perhaps Peter would be hurt by this. Yet why should he be? It was only out of kindness that he had offered to advise her. It would probably be a relief to him to know that someone else was dealing with her difficulties.

Making the excuse that John was not yet well enough to return to school, she did not send him back at the beginning of the term.

To Mrs. Montgomery she made no further reference to their conversation concerning Peter Craig. Often in the weeks that followed she wished she had never yielded to her impulse to question her mother as to what had happened in those far-off days. Something in the old lady's altered demeanour—a meekness, and a pathetic desire to show contrition for a past mistake, struck at Kathleen's heart. She would have welcomed any recrudescence of the old woman's fiery, dominating spirit—welcomed even the small quarrels that in the past had taken place between them.

It was a situation impossible to set right or to explain away; and though Kathleen, in all her dealings with her mother, showed a greater gentleness and consideration for the older woman's comfort, this still was not enough to ease the little ache of pity in her heart.

Summer had passed into the clear still days of early winter. Though in the parks and open spaces the grass was dried and brittle, roses in their second blooming made every garden gay, and all the inlets and wide, open reaches of the harbour glowed with a deeper, more radiant blue.

Peter Craig, returning late to his office one afternoon, found only his secretary awaiting him.

"I didn't like to go until you had signed these letters," she remarked. "This marked 'private' I haven't opened."

She handed him a somewhat bulky envelope addressed in what was obviously a woman's handwriting.

"Leave the letters. I'll sign them and post them myself. It's nearly six. You'd better cut along home."

Alone in the office, he signed the correspondence placed ready at his elbow, and then tore open the envelope marked 'private.' The handwriting was unknown to him, and he turned over the closely-written

sheets to glance at the signature. 'Your little friend, Peggy Vincent,' he read.

Smiling, he wondered why Peggy should have honoured him with such a voluminous epistle. A nice little kid! He was glad to think that he had been in a small degree instrumental in helping her up upon the first rung of fame's ladder. She'd climbed surely and fast since then. Apparently Melbourne had delighted as greatly in her performance of 'Gina' as Sydney had done. The run of *Dancing Mad* was said to have broken all records, but it must be nearing its end now.

Well, what had the child to say?

'Dear Mr. Craig,' he read.

'I expect you'll be rather surprised at hearing from me, but I hope you haven't quite forgotten me. I'm not likely to forget you—and my gratitude to you for bringing Dantry along to see me in Michael's sketch. If it hadn't been for that I'd never be where I am now—not that I'm going to be here much longer, for—but this is a great secret, only Mrs. Armitage and old Mr. McDowell know it—Michael and I are going to be married—very quietly—the day after our run ends here, and we're going to live at Koolandra with Michael's grandfather.

'The management are angry with me for leaving—but, of course, they don't know why—but my contract was only for Sydney and Melbourne, and they can easily get someone else for the part for the other towns. They won't get Cora. She's married a man called Vickers and gone off to the States.

'But none of this is what I'm *really* writing to you about. It's about my darling Mrs. Armitage. I'm sure things are going all wrong with her. I mean at 'Avalon.' I knew she wasn't doing frightfully well, and yet in spite

of that she was always so good and generous to everyone. But I thought things were a bit better after I left. Anyhow, they aren't now. This is awfully mixed, I'm afraid, and I've been thinking and thinking and *thinking* of what I could do. I hope I'm not doing the wrong thing by butting in and writing to you, but I'm sure you're fond of her—just as Michael and I are—well, no one could help being, could they? And perhaps you'll know better than we do how we could help, and you'll advise us.

'Charlie Moss wrote to me and said that some time ago—just when the tide seemed to have turned and 'Avalon' was full again—that that *hateful* old Miss Hobhouse started some scare about the drains. Said the new hot-water system was put in wrong and interfered with the drainage and they'd all be getting typhoid or something. As a matter of fact a new place—a cheaper place—had been opened a little higher up the hill, and Miss Hobhouse and Mrs. Epping, after having done their damndest about the drains at 'Avalon' and the danger of typhoid—nothing in it *at all*, of course—moved up there and gradually others moved too. Then yesterday I heard—indirectly—that 'Avalon' was being sold, so I don't quite know *what's* happened. I'm going to write to Mrs. Armitage and say that Michael and I will do *anything* we can for her if she's in need of money. I've saved a bit—not much, I'm afraid—and Michael's got a few pounds advance for his book. 'Old Sam' isn't so good at doling out cash, so I'm afraid it wouldn't be much good asking him, though I *will* try and wheedle a few hundreds out of him if the worst comes to the worst.

'Can you see Mrs. Armitage and find out just what the trouble amounts to? I tried to get her on the tele-

phone yesterday, but couldn't raise 'Avalon.' I know I needn't ask you to forgive me for writing about this. And that you'll know *exactly* what we ought to do. Best wishes from your little friend, Peggy Vincent.'

Craig read this letter through twice from beginning to end. Then, with frowning brows, he picked up his telephone receiver and dialled the 'Avalon' number. After a pause a voice enquired, "What number are you calling?"

He repeated the number and the prim and precise voice answered him, "That number is no longer connected."

He put down the receiver, and without another thought of the letters he was to post, walked out of the office and slammed the door behind him.

A few minutes' walk brought him to the car park, and getting out his car, he swung it round into the stream of homeward-bound traffic making for the bridge.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DUSK had fallen when he drew up at 'Avalon,' and the house looked silent and deserted. Could Kathleen have already gone? And, if so, where?

Opening the old rusted gate, he passed swiftly up the path to the front door and pressed the bell. As the servants' quarters were obviously at some distance it was impossible for him to tell whether there had been any sound from the bell or not. Seizing the heavy knocker, he rapped long and loudly, then pressed the bell again. If there were anyone at all in the house this summons must surely be heard.

A few moments passed before he was aware of footsteps and the sudden upspringing of a light within the hall. Then the door was opened and Kathleen stood facing him.

"Peter!" she exclaimed. "Why . . ."

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" he enquired somewhat brusquely. And without waiting for her reply, he entered the empty, echoing hall, and closed the front door behind him. "Now what's the meaning of this?" he asked, his eyes having in a second noticed the bare parquet flooring, the light coloured patches on the walls where pictures had once hung, the shaft of light thrown through the open door of the lounge showing the long room denuded like the hall of all its furniture. "Are you alone here?"

"At the moment I am. Vera's been with me all day, helping me pack. She's just run up the road to the dairy."

"Milk for a picnic tea, I suppose?"

She nodded.

"Isn't there anywhere to sit down?"

"Upstairs in my room, but . . ."

"This isn't the time for buts, my dear. I've got to talk to you."

Without a word she turned and led the way up the wide, uncarpeted staircase, then from the landing into a small room facing the balcony. In the light which she switched on he saw an open bureau strewn with papers, pictures piled against the wall, a table upon which stood a miscellaneous collection of china and silver, a half-filled packing-case, and a small huddle of furniture.

Pulling a chair forward for her to sit on, he found another for himself. "Now tell me all about it," he said. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all," she answered. "I'd rather like a cigarette myself."

His keen eyes noted that she looked infinitely weary, but she spoke cheerfully enough.

"Well?"

"Must I go through my tale of failure?" she asked. "'Avalon's' finished. The furniture's sold—all but this—and a few oddments downstairs, old personal things mother and I both value."

"But why?"

"Just because, I suppose, I haven't been a very good business woman—at any rate, not since things began to go badly with me."

"You'd never be a good business woman," he answered shortly. "Your heart's too soft. What about the house? That was yours, wasn't it?"

"It was mortgaged, but Gordon Bates has managed

to get it taken over by a woman who means to alter it and run it as a residential—small flats, you know.”

“Then you make something out of that?”

She nodded. “Yes, a little.”

“Where’s Mrs. Montgomery? And John?”

“Mother’s with Mrs. Simpson. John and I are to stay with the Brents for a few days. He’s there now. Vera and I were just finishing off here. Sorting old papers is such a hateful, depressing sort of job. I didn’t realize it would take so long.”

“Kathleen, be frank with me. How are you situated? Financially, I mean?”

“I shall get along all right. I’ve managed to pay my debts, thank Heaven. Gordon Bates has that hundred for you—the money I borrowed.”

“Damn the hundred!” He threw down his half-smoked cigarette into an ash-tray on the table. “Kathleen, it cuts me to the heart to see you bearing this . . . alone.”

“We’ve all got to bear things alone.”

“That isn’t true. You were never meant to fight your way in the world like this. You weren’t ever fitted for it. My God, it’s bitter enough for a man to play a lone hand—but for a woman . . .”

Something in his tone struck at Kathleen’s heart. Before she knew what she was about to say words jumped to her lips and she found she was asking the question which she had vowed she would never put to him. “Peter, was it a great blow to you—did you grieve very much at Jessie Deans’ marriage?”

He looked at her in blank astonishment. “Grieve? Of course I didn’t. We talked it over, Sandison and I. He’s a decent old boy. I was only too glad that she’d found a man broadminded enough to overlook her asso-

ciation with me and—as I suppose your Miss Hobhouse would put it—make an honest woman of her. But she didn't need Sir Oliver's name for that. She was always an honest woman."

"But why couldn't you . . ."

"Have done that myself? Because, my dear, the lady wasn't willing. After all those years I suppose our association had become too much like the ordinary jog-trot of matrimony. At any rate, she'd no desire to make it permanent. She's a good sort, Jessie, none better, and I'll never cease to be grateful to her, but I certainly didn't *grieve*, as you call it, when I knew she was to be comfortably settled. And the title pleased her no end."

"But weren't you . . . in love with her?"

He shook his head. "Not as you understand love, my dear. There's only been one woman in my life I've loved like that, and unfortunately she found I wasn't even of sufficient importance to her to let me know she cared for someone else."

"You mean that you loved *me*?" asked Kathleen quietly.

"Of course I do."

"Peter, I didn't intend to tell you—ever, but mother . . ." She stopped.

"Well?"

"It wasn't true when she told you—oh . . ." Her voice broke suddenly. "Don't blame her—please don't blame her. Perhaps she didn't mean actually to lie to you—but I wasn't engaged then—and when you never came near me—I thought you'd ceased to care."

"Ceased to care? My God, Kathleen, don't you know me better than that? And don't you realize your own power to hold a man?"

She made an effort to speak lightly. "You thought Michael had fallen a victim to my charms, and yet . . ."

"So he had, but that was just calf-love—a boyish infatuation. Peggy cured him. She sent me here today."

"Peggy!"

"One of your lame dogs. I'll own you were successful with Peggy and Michael. They weren't the sharks that gobbled up your cast bread. They want to return it to you."

"Give me money, you mean? I couldn't take money from my friends, Peter. Just become a sort of parasite. I'll manage all right."

"How?"

"I'm advertising for a job as housekeeper."

Something between a groan and an oath escaped him.

"You're not to do that. I forbid it."

Suddenly he crossed to her and, pulling her to her feet, held her tight within his arms. "Kathleen, marry me—give me the right to look after you. You thought I'd ceased to care! You foolish woman! Don't you know I've loved you always—always? I'll love you till I die. Can't you bring yourself to forget that I haven't lived according to the accepted code, that . . ."

"But I never blamed you. And I don't think Amy did. She knew—she understood—didn't she?"

He nodded, his hazel eyes looking deep into the blue of hers.

"And do you think I love you less than Amy did?" she asked. "Oh, Peter, ever since those first sweet days at Broken Bay I've wanted you—you've always been part of me. I'm not alive without you."

He bent his head and kissed her with a strong and passionate tenderness. It was a long kiss, but at length

SING A SONG OF SYDNEY

he released her, and bending back his head, smiled into her eyes.

"Who was it," he asked, "who once remarked that 'Life begins at forty'? We'll prove him damn well right."

THE END

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